

HELL'S LOOSE

ROLAND
PERTWEE

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HELL'S LOOSE



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BY
ROLAND PERTWEE
Author of "Interference"



New York
GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers

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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

DEDICATED TO
'THREE FUNNY MEN
(ALL BEING NICE)'
M. H. R. P., M. J. C., AND J. D. R. P.

HELL'S LOOSE

HELL'S LOOSE

∴

BOOK I

I

ADMIRAL SIR JESMOND BRIDGER defined the situation clearly enough. The Admiral was more than a senior officer; he was a very real friend.

‘You can’t exactly blame the Admiralty,’ he went on. ‘You are simply paying the price naval cuts demand. As a result of the war, the service is overcrowded with commanders and some of ’em must go. It’s no discredit to you or dozens of other men with damned fine records who are similarly placed. With only ten vacancies and over a hundred in the zone, influence is bound to tell.’

I was feeling pretty sore, but I nodded. Ten to one is long odds, but I hadn’t been able to resist the hope that one or two things I had pulled off in submarines, and later as a torpedo expert, would help me through. It is a blank lookout, after giving your heart and hand and the best years of manhood to a job, to get shelved at thirty-two.

‘What do you mean to do?’ he asked. ‘Stick on as a commander until you get your pension — or cut loose?’

I had a thousand or two my mother had left me, so

there was no immediate shortage where cash was concerned.

'I haven't really thought, sir,' I answered, 'but I rather expect I'll cut loose. If I have to find a new way of making a living, the sooner I find it the better.'

I had no very great enthusiasm for the idea of hanging on until I was forty for the modest pension the Admiralty bestows on retired officers. That prospect was a trifle too flat for my taste. It seemed to suggest a couple of rooms at Portsmouth, a membership in some potty little sailing club, and rather too many odd spots o' nights for the good of my health.

'If you'd care for introductions,' said the Admiral, 'Armstrong's or Vickers might be glad to have you.'

I grinned. Every retired naval man looks to those two firms with the fond belief that they are dying to take him on.

'P'r'aps that *is* a bit obvious.' The old man nodded, reading my thoughts. He tapped his teeth with a gold pencil-case. 'I tell you what, though, Oscar Kahnet, of the World United Oil Company, might be useful. In these days of motor traction both on land and water, the United have immense interests all over the world. They have plenty of jobs to offer, and what's more, they are willing to pay.'

That sounded more hopeful.

'I'll write now,' he said, and, sitting down to a table, grabbed a pen and wrote.

It would be unbecoming to record that letter in detail. Until I read it, I had no idea what a hell of a fellow I was.

'All right, don't blush,' he said; 'it's an honest expression of the way I feel.'

He tucked the letter in an envelope, gave it to me, shook hands, and ordered a couple of drinks.

'A rosy future,' he said, and we drank to that.

So I tendered my resignation and hung about Portsmouth until the formal acceptance came through. I could have taken leave if I had wanted to, but since I was going to say good-bye to the sea, I was in no hurry to get away.

I had ordered a room at the Swan and had sent a card to a pal of mine who had been looking after my spaniel Pixie, to have her sent along to the hotel, to be there when I arrived.

The porter told me Pixie had arrived at six o'clock and had expressed herself very unfavourably towards her surroundings.

'I guessed you'd be late, sir,' he said, 'and I didn't know 'ow to keep her quiet, whining something dismal, she was, till I 'it on the idea of putting that old gun-case you sent beside 'er. Wonnerful things, dogs, sir. She jest took one sniff at it, and ever since she's been sittin' alongside of it purring like a cat.'

I went to sleep that night with Pixie curled up like a caterpillar at the foot of the bed.

We were up betimes, and Pixie and I had a nice talk while I put on my civilian things.

'Our future plans are a trifle uncertain,' I told her. 'To-day we shall take the car, or what's left of it, and make for London Town. I have a letter, Pixie, which may result in my becoming an oil magnate. Anyway, we shall see. After that we'll slip down to the

Xavier, see the old man, and have a few days' shooting.'

At the mention of 'Xavier,' Pixie pricked up her ears, and at the word 'shooting' she went mad.

That I cut my chin while shaving is due to the fact that Pixie was routing out an imaginary rabbit from beneath the dressing-table.

I had not written to my father to let him know that I was out of the service. He disliked receiving letters almost as much as he disliked writing them. He always read *The Times* and I knew very well that he was aware from the Gazette that I was not in the list of promotions. The last thing I expected from him was a letter of sympathy. He argued, and rightly, that I was sure of his sympathy. Very well, then — why waste time braying about it?

We did not linger long over breakfast. I paid my bill and marched off with Pixie to heel, to inspect the old creak of a car which I kept in a garage on the fringes of the town for use when I was ashore.

There are few sadder sights than a neglected motor car. The radiator and the lamps had collected blue mould and looked as though they were made of Cheshire cheese. However, she responded willingly enough to a swing on the starting-handle, and very soon, with Pixie in the seat beside me and my gear stuffed into the dicky, we were clanking along up the London road.

2

Having regard to its age and to the neglect it had suffered, the car served us bravely. I had an early lunch at Simpson's and presented myself at that great

new building in Kingsway which is the headquarters of the World United Oil and Transport Company. I presented my letter and asked for an interview with Oscar Kahnet. The porter to whom I made the demand expressed an air of astonishment.

'Have you an appointment?' he enquired.

'That's a question you'll be able to answer yourself after he's seen that letter,' said I.

He departed, shaking his head. Presently he returned and asked me to accompany him to a waiting-room. It certainly was that. I waited enormously. Presently a very bright young man breezed in and gave me a look-over. He had a well-brushed head and carried his hands in his trousers pockets.

'I say, what's it about?' he said.

As an introductory phrase it struck me as vague.

'About half an hour since I arrived,' said I.

He grinned.

'I call that funny,' he said, and added, 'Do you really *expect* to see the Guv'nor?'

I asked why not.

'He hates seeing people,' was the disingenuous reply. 'Just hates it. I don't know anything he hates worse than that.'

'I am sure,' said I, 'he will enjoy seeing me.'

The young man laughed.

'Are you really set on it?' he asked.

I told him yes.

At that he sighed and retired, pausing at the door to remark: 'I honestly think it 'ud be much pleasanter if you cut the idea.'

For another ten minutes I justified the title of the

waiting-room. At the end of that time another man appeared — a very silent and beaten man who conducted me to a door which was labelled 'Mr. Cole, Asst. Manager.'

He left me with Mr. Cole, who seemed busy. Between my arrival and the first words he addressed to me he sacked some one on the telephone, signed a large pile of correspondence, and cleaned his *pince-nez* with a small square of wash leather. At last he said, after the fashion of a man who has made a distressing discovery, 'You are Commander Robert Shaftoe?'

I nodded.

Pushing open an inner door, he led me along a narrow passage to a very small room, naked of furniture save for an immense armchair in which Oscar Kahnet, with a handkerchief over his face and his hands folded across an enormous stomach, sat peacefully asleep.

'Do not attempt to wake him,' Mr. Cole besought. 'Remain perfectly quiet and presently he will become aware of you.'

So saying he retreated like a shadow.

In the course of my travels I have encountered some fairly remarkable types, but without fear of contradiction, I declare Oscar Kahnet was the most remarkable of all. He was at once the tallest, largest, and fattest man I have ever seen. Recumbent in his chair with his small, pale blue hands lying on his belly and his face covered, he presented a Brobdingnagian picture I shall not readily forget. He breathed very silently, and the only signs of life were the movements of the handkerchief as he inhaled and exhaled the air. The huge rolls

of fat which girt his immense body were still as death. There was a broad window-ledge, and, tiptoeing across the room, I seated myself upon it to wait his pleasure. I noticed that the letter of introduction from the Admiral lay crumpled at his feet. That, the armchair, and himself were the only details of the apartment, if I except the mouthpiece of a telephone, with a little row of bell pushes alongside, which were bracketed to the wing of the chair.

How long I waited I do not know, partly on account of the fact that the man and his empty room interested me enormously. I remember thinking that he looked like a reservoir for the oil from which his fortune had been amassed.

My thoughts and speculations were thus occupied, when, without a word of warning, he blew the handkerchief away as it might have been a puff of thistle-down, and stared at me with a pair of innocent blue eyes.

I use the adjective 'innocent' advisedly. His eyes and, indeed, all his features were of a surprising innocence. They resembled the features of a baby — a little round blob of a nose, a red curly mouth, and those big blue eyes. This in itself was surprising enough, but to find that infantile equipment lodged in the centre of a massive head and a great wallow of shapeless cheeks and double chins all but excited from me an exclamation of amazement.

'Sitting there!' he exclaimed. 'Who the devil asked you to sit down?'

As he spoke I had my third surprise, for his voice, without being actually falsetto, was thin and fluty as a

girl's. I can best describe it by saying it tinkled like those glass wind bells that come from Japan.

I rose and made some pretence of bowing.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' I said, 'but, since you were asleep, I assumed a privilege which I supposed you would offer me had you been awake.'

'Oh, dear, what a tiresome fellow!' he said. 'If I had wanted you or any one else to sit down, I should have provided chairs — lots of chairs. People who sit down stop too long — they stop interminably. I can see what it is, I shall have to have glass put on that window-sill — bits of broken glass. That'll be the thing. Now, before you go, what is it?'

'I thought, sir, you might have a job to offer me.'

'There's a damn silly thing to say,' said he. 'Utterly silly. I have hundreds of jobs I might offer you — if I wanted to — but I don't.'

'I was more or less prepared for that answer,' said I.

Oscar Kahnet gave a light treble laugh.

'I hope you were,' he said. 'Otherwise the men you have already seen would get the sack. I make a point of being as difficult to get at as possible, because then I know that any one who does succeed in reaching me isn't altogether hopeless. The wash-outs generally retreat at the first barricade.'

He stopped talking and stared at me thoughtfully. I said nothing. I waited. Presently he said:

'I could send you to Mexico — to Rumania — to Mesopotamia, but I am not going to.'

I asked why.

'You'd be tiresome — I'm sure you'd be tiresome. You ex-naval men are very tiresome. You don't know

enough to hold down a really important job, and you are too used to commanding others to be bossed about in a little job.'

I told him I had learnt to keep my temper.

'Have you? I very much doubt it,' he said. 'No — no. You are no use to me. Besides,' he added, 'I don't like you. You are too lean — wiry. Lean and wiry men rarely run to brain. Let me have men about me who are fat — fat.' His little blue fingers drummed upon his waist-line. 'Well, well — off you go. Run along.'

And, picking up his handkerchief, he covered his face and reassumed the attitude of repose.

As I emerged from the revolving doors to the street, Pixie greeted me with a joyous bark, which mingled with the cries of newsboys heralding the probability of a coal strike.

'The noes have it, old girl,' said I. 'It's us for the home farm.' And, giving the engine a crank up, I headed the car towards the south.

3

My father never allowed himself to be surprised. An admirable philosophy so filled his days as to leave no room for astonishment. By those who failed to understand him, and they were numerous, for he was at no pains to explain himself, he was regarded as a hard, implacable man, who went his way callous to the feelings of others. This was untrue, for no one did more, nor advertised his charity less, than John Shaftoe. While others were debating deeds of benevolence, my father was performing them. But although his acts were

deserving of credit, his methods at times were ungainly. A woman, whose life he saved at the risk of his own, complained that, while dragging her shoreward through broken water, his language was terrible to hear. He was a man of tireless energy, unvarying habit, and unshakable purposes. At the age of sixty-eight he still rose at five-thirty every morning, and after a cold bath strode the fields of his farm, in wet weather or dry, until breakfast, which was served at seven. Prior to breakfast the household was summoned to family prayers, which he conducted himself in a mighty voice that made the rafters ring.

His watchword was 'self-reliance.' He liked men to stand on their own legs and by their own convictions. No one could deny that he was a fine example of his creed. As far back as memory carries me, I never saw him afraid. His courage was magnificent. I do not think he understood the meaning of fear. In 1917 when the Isle of Sheppey was receiving nightly attention from German aircraft, he moved there for a month to test the experience. His hobbies were tying flies — he was the best fisherman I ever met — reading Greek plays in the original, and pasting odds and ends clipped from newspapers in a book. To this pastime he devoted twenty minutes every evening and had filled thirty-two large volumes with clippings.

As a young man he was intended for the Church, but in his second year at Oxford he abandoned devotional studies for a roving life. He became one of the crew of a windjammer engaged in Eastern trade, experienced many adventures by the anger of men and elements, established a reputation as a boxer with a terrific

punch, enjoyed a brush with Chinese pirates, and increased his fortune by lucky deals in indigo and Japanese silks. Thereafter he returned to England and bought Xavier Farm, a flint-built house of some sixteen rooms and fifteen hundred acres, married my mother, whom he adored, prayed for a large family, and achieved me and a daughter some eleven years my junior.

My mother was the most sensitive and humorous of women. She died on Armistice night. Gratitude and reaction killed her. God rest her soul. The day of Britain's victory was hers also. I think her spirit must have ridden lightly toward heaven on the wings of that triumph.

4

The house stood at the end of the avenue, low-built and snug and strong as a fortress. The last rays of the sun flashed on the facets of the rough chipped flints with which the walls were built and made them look like nuggets of gold. Green mosses, lichen, and clusters of ivy wove a pattern over the roof of Horsham shale. In the background, serene and smooth as a woman's bosom, rose the great torso of the down, shadowed here and there with patches of sepia gorse.

It was the hour at which my father partook of the serious meal of the day, and, knowing he would be at home, I blew the horn and raised a loud halloo like a schoolboy back for the holidays. In instant response, his face appeared at the window, his mighty jaw with the close-cropped beard, rotating from side to side in the process of masticating the first mouthful of his re-

past. A second later, my sister Anne dashed out of the house waving her hands and roaring welcomes. Vocal power was a feature of our family.

'It's Bobface!' she shouted. 'Why on earth didn't you tell us? Come on in! Isn't this topping? Dad has begun tea — kiss me. Do hurry!'

I was dragged from the car and into the porch.

My father was in the act of emptying his second boiled egg upon his third slice of cold ham when I came into the room. His blue eyes twinkled a greeting. His huge hand went out to meet mine, and shook it, and pulled me down into a chair by his side.

'Pleased to see you, Bob,' he said. 'Cut yourself a slice of ham. Anne, pass the eggs to your brother. What's all this talk of labour troubles? Another strike, they say.'

It was all splendidly normal and I glowed under it.

Anne passed the eggs and poured me out an enormous cup of tea. We drank our tea from pint cups at Xavier, and our beer from quart tankards. My father believed in beer as combining a liquor and an institution, and despised men who refused it.

Of course Anne was bubbling with curiosity as to why I had left the navy, but she and I were too well disciplined to give or ask for confidences while the stern business of sustenance was in hand. My father was a believer in the theory that there is a right time for everything. He was no advocate of talk during meals. It was not until I had been fed enormously and thin wreaths of tobacco smoke were wisping overhead that the first enquiry was made. It came from the old man, couched in terms of characteristic frankness.

'So they were too many for you.'

I laughed and nodded.

'Let's hear.'

I told the story much as I have written it down. The telling was punctuated by snorts of indignation from Anne and an occasional grunt from the old man. Pixie, who was familiar with the circumstances, turned round three times at the beginning of the narrative and went to sleep.

The old man heard me out in silence. At the end he rose and stretched himself.

'You won't be on the shelf long,' he said. 'A true Shaftoe never learnt the knack of idling. Well, I'll take a walk round now while you talk to your sister. There are still a few pheasants at the foot of the downs if you fancy a bit of gunning to-morrow.'

The door banged behind him.

5

After breakfast next day I put my gun together and, whistling Pixie to heel, set off along the farm lane. It was a sharp, clear morning that set the pulses beating. The trodden mud of the lane was crisp with frost which had silvered the grass and brambles on either side; the downland turf was starred with flints and crows. Humming to myself, I strode along until I came to where the way divided, one path to the lower pastures of the farm, and the other along the foot of the downs.

'What's it to be, Pixie?' I said. 'West and the chance of a snipe, or south for bigger game?'

With this weighty problem to decide, Pixie sat down

for a moment and breathed heavily, then with a joyous yelp set off to the right.

'The downs have it,' I said; 'adventure lies to the south.'

In the light of what came after, I have often wondered whether Pixie had any foreknowledge of the consequences of her choice. Had we turned to west instead of south, I suppose in due course I should have gravitated into a humdrum life and possibly have ended my days as the manager of some commercial concern and the owner of a villa residence in a London suburb.

It may have been the scent of a rabbit that persuaded Pixie's choice — for a moment later she scuttled him out of the grass and retrieved him very prettily after the shot was fired. We had the luck to bag a brace of partridges and a hare before setting foot on the spongy downland turf that leaps from the valley to the rippling skyline. After a sharp climb, I struck the old pre-Roman slunways that traverses the shoulder of the down in a long diagonal ascent. My object was to get above a delve of tangled woodland that clung to a hollow in the slope and which in the past had yielded many a pheasant. It was a wild patch — so netted with bramble and undergrowth as to defy the intrusion of man. Report claimed that Farthing Hackett had been used as a flint mine by the dwellers of the hills, but I could not speak with authority as to the truth of this, although as a boy I had picked up flint arrowheads by the barrows near by. Fostered, no doubt, by its inaccessibility, a mystery haunted the place. On the upper sides entrance was impossible, owing to a pre-

cupitous chalk face which curved in a sweeping semicircle. In formation the hackett resembled a teacup with a segment broken out — the bowl was filled with a thorny jungle, so dense in character that even a dog could barely force his way through. Rising from the jungle were a dozen tall beeches, whose lower branches intertwined with the thorn and bramble clinging to the steep upper sides. Every conceivable species of shrub and brush flourished there, as though by common impulse seeking to defend the place against intruders. May, elderberry, thorn, bramble, and juniper were linked and locked together by the twisting lianas of wild and unchecked clematis and ivy. Farthing Hackett was an eerie place and the haunt of many wild things. It was a sanctuary for foxes, and more than once I had seen badgers enter there. The merlin built his nest in a lightning-struck tree that reared its twisted arms out of the chaos of dead and living vegetation, and underneath in the rabbit burrows weasels and stoats carried on their dreadful warfare. Once, it is said, a golden eagle — but that is a story told of every wild place in all parts of England.

As I approached the top of the hackett, a number of pigeons crashed through the higher branches and sailed away. I did not fire, since experience had taught me that an unwary shot often scares away a more worthy quarry. Pixie had her own way of working Farthing Hackett. I knew what her opinion of me would be if I messed up the programme. She conducted me to my appointed stand — a tumulus level with the upper branches of the beeches and, satisfied with my disposition, galumphed down hill on the farther side of the

covert. It was not long before things began to happen. With a double whirr of wings came two hen pheasants, which I contrived to drop neatly enough in the open. Followed a spectacular right-and-left at a pigeon and a rabbit, and I am ashamed to say I missed them both. I was reloading, to a mild accompaniment of invective, when out of the brown heart of the hackett rose an albino pheasant. He was a magnificent cock bird, almost entirely white, and his plumage was glorious. To the best of my knowledge there had never been an albino on the shoot before, and my desire for him was great.

Up he came, higher and higher, corkscrewing through the air as though fitted with a helicopter. This was annoying, for had I risked a shot it was certain he would crash in the centre of the hackett where the chances were twenty to one against recovery. Sooner or later, he would be bound to sweep to right or left, so I held fire until the decision was taken. Then an exasperating thing happened. He saw me, checked his upward flight, wheeled about, and turned toward the north. I had no choice. It was a falling angle flight with a disposition to swerve toward the left, which I believe is generally accepted as a difficult shot to bring off. Also the range was excessive. I prayed hard and let him have the choke at about sixty yards. At first I feared I had missed, but a second later he dipped, righted himself, then towered straight into the air in diminishing circles. It was a glorious ascent. A fine example of will power over muscle. He rose and rose, towering high, then tottered, and with shut wings plunged like a diver into the belly of the hackett. I

heard Pixie's gruff cough of approval and the sound of her body crashing through the twigs.

'Good girl! Find him — seek dead!' I cried.

For answer there came a series of short, angry barks, the meaning of which I knew too well. Leaning over the edge of the little precipice I looked down and saw that my fears were realised — the albino pheasant had not reached the ground; his body had been caught in the branches of a thornbush and hung out of Pixie's reach.

6

Had it been an ordinary bird I should have smothered my disappointment, whistled Pixie to heel, and gone my way; but a powerful impulse persuaded me that on no account must this albino pheasant be left to rot upon a tree.

I had already started the descent when I heard Pixie give a low, dismal wail, like a dog baying the moon. It was an eerie sound, the like of which I had never heard her utter before, and it sent a shiver through me. She repeated it again and again, and each time it grew in intensity and the quality of fear.

'For God's sake,' she seemed to say, 'for God's sake, come quickly.'

'All right, old girl, all right!' I shouted, and, tucking the gun under my arm, I slithered downhill as fast as I could go.

In the valley below, some three hundred yards distant, I saw old Pickavance trimming a hedge. Here was luck, for the old hedger never worked with less than a brace of swap hooks and with the loan of one

my task would be simplified. I waved my arm to him, and with the slow gait of your true yokel he came toward me, honing his hook as he walked.

'Marning, Master Bob,' he said. "'Twas a gran' shot I sees 'ee fire. 'Tis a pity her dropped in hackett.'

'Yes,' I panted. 'Lend me that hook, Pick; I mean to get the bird.'

Rather reluctantly he parted with his weapon.

'Tis turruble thick, an' I doubt 'twill turn the edge.'

'I'll treat it gently,' I promised, 'but I couldn't let that bird go, Pick.'

The old man scratched his head.

'Twas the white 'un.'

I nodded.

'I doubt no good'll come of shootin' the white 'un,' he said. 'Summat be queer about 'er and summat's queer 'bout Farthin' Hackett, what's more. They do say 't isn't *intended* man should enter there — still ——'

Once again Pixie's cry rang out, hollow and afraid.

The old man turned white under his tan and gripped my arm.

'Hearken to 'er,' he said; "'t isn't right.'

Seizing the bill hook and shaking him off, I made a dash for the screen of bushes that guarded the lower half of the hackett. A tremendous excitement obsessed me, and I attacked the network of branches with savage energy. As I slashed at the vines, I could hear Pixie some forty yards beyond, whining piteously. At the sound of my approach, she had given up baying and was making a gallant effort to allay her fears. For the life of me I could not imagine what had frightened

her, for in the three years of our companionship, she had never before betrayed the slightest alarm. The jungle through which I cut my way was dense and impenetrable and revealed nothing ahead beyond the range of a yard or two.

As I approached the centre, the difficulty of progress diminished, and after twenty minutes I reached something in the nature of a little clearing, which zigzagged this way and that. The trees hereabouts were higher and the undergrowth was not so prolific. By stooping I was able to proceed quite easily. A flash of white in the close-knit branches of a may tree revealed itself to be the dead body of my albino pheasant and at the cost of a dozen scratches I hauled him down. A speck of blood at the back of the head showed where the pellet had entered. He was a magnificent bird and, carefully as possible, I tucked him away in the pocket of my shooting-coat and glanced round for Pixie. But though I could hear her whining a little distance away, she was nowhere to be seen. By this time I had almost reached the concave chalk face of the cliff, beneath which spread a semicircle of high brambles, and beyond a narrow strip of grass invisible from the down-side above and below.

‘Pixie,’ I called, and behind the screen of brambles she gave an answering yelp. It was only a matter of minutes to cut through the tangle and to step out on the grass patch beyond.

There was Pixie, the hair on the back of her neck bristling and erect. She was looking at something black and shapeless that lay on the ground.

I cannot pretend to understand why it was no surprise to me to see that shapeless, sprawling thing. In some queer way I had expected my incursion into Farthing Hackett would have no ordinary results. At the first glance I realised it was a dead man. It lay face downward with the head twisted in my direction. Its face, or rather the bones which once had supported the face, for not a shred of flesh remained, was half hidden with fallen leaves. Pixie slunk away and licked my hand as I stooped to examine the thing more closely. It was terribly reminiscent of those poor dead whips that for years of war hung untouched upon the barbed wire of No Man's Land. So forlorn and neglected it looked — so tired and collapsed. I brushed away the dead leaves to get a better view and started back with an involuntary cry. From one of the cavernous eye-sockets had come a flash of light — a dazzling wink. It was pretty astonishing and unnerving. I had to take a firm grip of myself to approach the thing a second time. The explanation was so simple that I almost laughed. The dead man was wearing glasses — not ordinary glasses, but motor goggles with wide projecting rims. At the mere moving of the leaves, the last strand of cotton and elastic parted and fell away.

Now it is not reasonable to expect to find a dead body wearing motor goggles in the heart of a downland copse five miles from the nearest road. Further examination revealed the startling fact that the dead man's cranium was covered with a black cakey crust, which, as I scratched it with my fingers, proved to be leather which had long since perished. An idea was be-

ginning to form in my head and rapidly took shape when I perceived the clothes he had worn were of the same material. The upper part of his body was encased in a kind of jerkin with a strap about the waist, his lower limbs being contained in a garment resembling a fisherman's waders. The inference was obvious. The skeleton of Farthing Hackett was that of a dead aviator. With this certainty I shot a glance above me and noticed with surprise that the body lay some four feet under the shelter of the chalk face, which, it will be remembered, caved inward. If he had fallen from the sky, it would have been impossible for him to have struck this particular spot. That being so, either my theory was wrong or he could not have been killed outright, but had had strength enough to drag himself a few yards along the ground before falling forward to die. The latter was the more reasonable supposition and was substantiated by the position of the body, which lay as a man might have lain who was trying to claw his way along. Something in the shortness of his frame struck me as peculiar, and, running my fingers over it, I found that both thigh bones had been dislocated, the right thigh having been thrust six inches out of place and being socketed beneath the ribs.

I turned my attention then to the right hand, which was crumpled palm downward on the smooth surface of a moss-covered rock. Beneath it I found a flint arrow-head as though the fingers of the man had grasped it before death claimed him. Without attaching any significance to this discovery at the time, I dropped it in my pocket and turned my attention to the clothes he had been wearing, hoping that in an inner pocket I

might discover traces of the man's identity. Nor was I disappointed, although my action in turning the body over resulted in its almost complete disintegration. My fingers encountering a bulky shape, I drew it forth and found it to be a well-filled note-case in a state of astonishing preservation. The note-case was made of cloth wrapped in watered silk and encircled with a strap. Without attempting to investigate its contents, I laid it aside and continued my search.

The next find was interesting. It was a piece of talc about the size of a visiting-card, protecting a label of some kind. Its outer edges were machine-stitched and the reverse side was covered with some much-perished material resembling lining. For a moment it puzzled me, until the solution sprang to my brain that it was a tailor's label of the kind generally fitted to the breast pocket of a coat. I held it in a ray of sunlight and could faintly distinguish printed characters. The letters L E R O were plainly legible; the rest was a mere blur. Putting it beside the note-case, I rummaged again in the cavity of the dead man's thorax, but beyond the discovery of a cigarette-case, some silver coins, two keys and a rusty buckle, the metal parts of an ordinary pair of braces, and a quantity of buttons made of bone, pearl, and metal, there was nothing to establish his identity. From the number of buttons it was clearly evident he had been wearing a suit beneath the leather jerkin and overalls. In the hope that some of them might bear the maker's name, I sorted them over, but without success. Reluctantly I dropped them back more or less where I had found them, for it struck me as unwise to take away anything that the police

would obviously expect to find. As matters stood, I had put myself in an invidious position by collaring the man's note-case, but, although every argument of good citizenship favoured its return, curiosity conquered reason. But for me it was probable that the body might have rested in Farthing Hackett until it had fallen to dust. On those grounds alone I felt justified in getting what satisfaction I could out of the matter. If the book contained nothing of interest, it would be easy enough to restore it before informing the police.

A glance at my watch revealed the fact that it was after twelve and that if I were to be back at the farm in time for dinner it behoved me to hurry. Wherefore, I slipped the note-case and the square of talc in my breast pocket and stooped to arrange the body as nearly as might be in its original position. Whilst so engaged, I discovered that the man had been armed. A revolver, scarlet with rust, lay under the curve of the pelvis. I knew something about firearms and a glance was enough to assure me that the weapon was of German origin.

'That's a Schwartz and Lieber,' I said, as I picked it up.

The thing was solid with rust and defied my effort to break open the breech. A peep at the chambers, however, revealed the fact that it was loaded — or rather that five of the chambers were loaded — the sixth contained an empty shell.

So the mystery deepened. My friend had fired a shot some time before he died.

I was kneeling with the weapon in my hand when my father's voice rang out from the hillside.

'Bob! Bob! Halloo-a!'

'Halloo-a!' I replied.

'Where are you?'

'Here below.'

'Anything wrong?'

'No — I'm coming along.'

I carefully replaced the pistol where I had found it, and, with a glance over my shoulder at the figure of the dead man of Farthing Hackett, with his broken fingers sprawling on the rock, forced my way along the narrow passage I had cut through the undergrowth.

8

Crawling out of the scrub, I emerged on the bare hillside to find my father standing a few yards away. He was looking grim. The behaviour of Pixie suggested the admission of a new soul into heaven. She rolled on the grass, yelped, and gave rein to such enthusiasm as I had never before seen her exhibit.

'Now what precisely,' demanded my father, 'have you been up to? Old Pick came up to the farm in a sweat of terror — talked a lot of infernal nonsense about a white pheasant, Farthing Hackett, and your dog having gone mad. Said you'd gone into the place like a lunatic best part of two hours ago and hadn't shown up since.' \

'Pick's a good-natured idiot,' I grinned. 'There was a white pheasant and here he is.'

My father nodded over the bird.

'Did it take you two hours to retrieve?'

'Not altogether.'

'Well, then.'

I hesitated.

'It's the first time I've ever got into the core of the place and ——'

'Now, look here, Bob,' he cut in, 'if there's something you don't want to tell me, say so — but, confound it, boy, don't hedge.'

'There's a dead man in Farthing Hackett.'

My father stopped and looked at me.

'A dead man. Who is he?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'That's what I hope to find out. That's what I hope this may tell us.' And I produced the note-case.

He frowned.

'Have you been robbing the dead?'

'Not to say robbing,' I replied. 'I've borrowed this case from the body of what I believe to have been a German aviator.'

'How do you make that out?'

As briefly as possible I explained the circumstances of what had taken place, and the reasons for the inference I had drawn.

'Yes, but he was wearing civilian clothes underneath, you say.'

'A good many spies were dropped out of planes,' I said.

'Humph,' he grunted. 'This one seems to have been dropped with a vengeance. Now wait a bit — to the best of my belief no German aircraft crossed this part of the country throughout the war. If that's so your theory explodes. For some reason this air route wasn't popular. Precious few of our own machines came this way. The coast patrol followed the south side of the

downs. I remember when flying was in its infancy ——' He stopped short and puckered his forehead, then half to himself muttered, 'I must look that up. In the mean time, boy, the best thing you can do is to tell the police.'

'After I've been through these papers,' I replied.

Ours is an obstinate stock — a fact my father recognised.

'I've told you the right thing to do,' he said. 'If you prefer to act otherwise, it's your own concern.'

As we turned into the farm lane, I saw, ahead, the figure of Rogers, the local constable, his back toward us.

'There you are,' said my father. 'Your obvious duty stands before you. With the knowledge you possess you haven't a leg to stand on if you pass that man and say nothing.'

'Right,' said I; 'then I won't pass him.' And, vaulting over a gate, I returned to the farm by the fields.

I think my father's curiosity was every bit as whetted as my own, for he passed the village constable with no more than a word of greeting and a nod.

9

I fear I made but a poor showing at the dinner table; my thoughts were too occupied by what the letter-case might contain to allow me to eat. It was bad luck, for Anne had spread herself to do honour to the occasion and was personally responsible for the cooking. She was disappointed, and her disappointment increased when I declined her offer to walk round the fields, on the grounds of having letters to write.

There was a magnifying-glass on the mantelpiece which I carried upstairs to my own room, the door of which I locked. I sat down by the window and with fingers which trembled set about to open the dead man's note-case. The watered-silk cover had preserved the contents remarkably well. In the first section were several packets of bank-notes of various nationalities. Fivers — francs — dollar bills — Italian lire and the now extinct Imperial German marks. The notes had an unused look and in the majority of cases their serial numbers ran consecutively. To avoid confusion each little packet was secured with a separate elastic band which had perished — or lost its nature, as some would say. I noticed that these bands were all the same size, which suggested that the packets had probably been issued at the same time. The Bank of England notes were to the value of one hundred pounds. The francs and the lire at the existing rate of exchange were worth considerably less. With the market still a shade favourable to America, the dollar bills were at a slight premium. The existence of a new post-war currency in Germany made it impossible to estimate the value of the marks.

Bucketing round the Mediterranean had kept me fairly well informed on the subject of foreign exchanges, which may account for the idea which began to form in my mind. These packets, with the exception of the Bank of England notes, were all composed of slightly unequal sums, such as might have occurred had a man entered a bank and asked for a hundred pounds' worth of English, French, American, Italian, and German money. Assuming this surmise to be correct, it

should be possible, by examining old exchange records, to determine almost to a day when the notes were issued.

Since discovering the German revolver on the body of the dead aviator, I was confident I was dealing with a case of German espionage, but a comparison of the various sums contained in the little packets provided reason for doubting this belief. So far as I could remember, the rate of exchange between France and England throughout the war had never been more favourable to us than 27.90. Taking that figure to be correct, the packet of francs I had taken from the note-case, assuming them to have been issued during the war, would have been worth a trifle less than a hundred pounds. The same applied to the lire, while the American dollar bills, with the exchange favourable to them during the war, might have been worth anything up to a hundred and twenty-odd pounds. The problem was a nice one, for on the face of it, assuming the man had desired to have a hundred pounds' worth of all these currencies, he could not have received the amounts I held in my hands at any period during the war.

Laying the notes on one side, I quickly emptied the other sections of the case. There was an unfinished letter in pencil — a sheet of paper covered with jottings, two snapshot photographs, and a sealed envelope marked 'MW-XX.3.' Nowhere could I find a date or a name. The sealed envelope, when held to the light, appeared to contain a chemical formula. For some time I sat thinking and fingering the envelope, then, yielding to an impulse, I took up the little packets

of notes and went from the room, locking the door after me.

In response to repeated supplications from Anne, my father had consented recently to the installation of a telephone. He had insisted, however, that it should be put in an upstairs bedroom corridor, as far away from his own room as possible.

I asked for a City number and was lucky enough to get a quick connection and to find the man I wanted was at his office.

'That you, Dominic?' I said. 'Shaftoe speaking on a trunk call.'

Dominic Vane expressed surprise and gratification.

'Shooting, I suppose — lucky brute. How are you and what's the trouble?'

'Only this,' said I. 'If a man went into a bank and asked for a hundred pounds' worth of French, American, Italian, and German money and he received —' I told him the exact amount of notes in each packet — 'what was the day of what year he went into the bank.'

After a thoughtful pause, Dominic replied:

'I suppose this call is costing you about two and ninepence, so in common civility and friendship, I'll buy it.'

'But I really want to know,' I insisted.

'The answer,' said he, 'in French currency is *un citron*.'

It was difficult, but I contrived to convince him there was no jest in the matter.

'Let's have it again,' said he.

I repeated the figures.

'I dare say I can find out — give me your number and I'll ring you.'

I did and returned to the perusal of the dead man's papers.

The first to which I gave attention was the unfinished letter in pencil. The handwriting was difficult and the characters were so faded as to be almost illegible. It was written in English, which rather surprised me. Remembering to have heard that the legibility of pencil writing may sometimes be improved by dampening the surface I applied a sheet of wet blotting-paper to the letter with the happiest results. The scrawl had been written with an indelible pencil and the characters coming in contact with moisture revived to a purple clarity. With no difficulty at all I was able to read:

FRANK,

I scribble this while waiting for the aeroplane. Barely two hours ago I found out they have discovered my hiding-place. Any moment may see the end of things so far as I am concerned. It's hard luck to have reached the goal — to hold, at least, the key to fortune and be faced only with extinction. I was a fool ever to try to handle the stuff myself — the brain of an inventor is a poor match against the business brain. I was crazy to believe I had shaken them off. I believe O. K. can look into other men's heads and read their inmost thoughts. With a fair start I might have made a dash for America. There's no chance of that, but I shall try to reach Hamburg to-night. I'm terribly worried about my two girls. Noelle has been such a Briton. It'll be a grim injustice if they don't benefit. By God, I honestly swear I'd rather hand over the formula to a total stranger than sell my silence to O. K. for half a million. As for the others — those crooks that — I hear the plane. Will they have heard it, too, I wonder? I'm going to make a dash for it now — wish me luck.

The letter must have been hastily crammed into the envelope before the hunted man made a break for the aeroplane. I remembered that one empty shell in the revolver and wondered if the shot had been fired before he reached the plane in which he sought to escape. Had any one been hit? A wave of pity went over me for this fellow countryman of mine that I had wrongly decided was a German spy. Mixed with the pity was an element of resentment against some person or persons unknown and particularly against one who bore the initials 'O. K.' and who was gifted with powers to divine men's thoughts. Had he, by bribery or persuasion, caused the pilot of the aeroplane to pitch out the unhappy inventor into the jungle of Farthing Hackett? There had been no signs of a crashed machine near the spot where the body lay. That was a point I had carefully looked for. High up in the air had murder been done? I picked up the sealed envelope again, and at the touch of it the inference that a murder had been committed disappeared. Perhaps it is stretching imagination too far to say that there is a definite feel about a thing of value, be it jewellery, porcelain, or even a wisp of paper. To all outward appearances here was an ordinary envelope bearing an ordinary dab of black sealing-wax and yet I felt as though the key to a fortune were in my grasp. There was no excuse for assuming the fortune belonged to me, although the writer of the letter had written that he would rather his discovery fell into the hands of a total stranger than to those men who directly or indirectly were hounding him to death.

Strengthened in my determination by that single

phrase in the letter, I broke the seal and took out a neatly folded sheet of pale blue paper. I knew enough chemistry to grasp the fact that what I read was a formula of some kind, but every word and quantity was in code. On the face of it the thing was a piece of inexplicable gibberish — a puzzle which, without possession of the key, would never be solved. In the service I had some dealings with code messages and was sufficiently acquainted with the subject to recognise that it was a numerical code which had been used. With the right numbers in my possession I could have read the thing as easily as an evening news poster, but without them I might work for years without finding the solution.

At the bottom of the page written in ordinary long hand were the following words:

By increasing the quantities of Nos. 2 and 5 a more powerful explosive may be obtained. This, however, would be impracticable in the case of modern I.C. cylinders, as they are not constructed to withstand very high pressure. Under present I.C. conditions the quantities given may be taken to provide the maximum efficiency consonant with safety. The cost of manufacture on anything like a large scale would be so small as to enable the substance to be sold at less than one tenth the price of any gush oil now in the market.

It did not require vast intelligence to deduce what that code formula contained. For 'I.C.' read internal combustion. The dead man of Farthing Hackett had discovered a petrol substitute.

I think for the moment I was rather disappointed. Every year since motor traction came into general use, the newspapers have told the tale of the man who has

discovered the penny-a-gallon motor spirit. How often had one read of the committee of experts gathered in a secluded spot; of the bucket of water drawn from the village pump and transformed as though by magic into an explosive fluid; of the car which climbed higher and faster than angels. And then, after a few days, contradiction. Only the myth explodes, and on we go filling our tanks with natural oils while the prices rise and fall.

With a pang of disappointment I tossed the paper aside and dropped my hand on the table. It fell beside one of the two snapshots I had removed from the case. Carelessly I picked it up and brought it to the light. It was the photograph of a little girl sitting on a wall, with her feet crossed. Her hair was short and exceptionally smooth. Her eyes — I am not susceptible in the ordinary way, but that child's eyes were the most arresting I had ever seen. They were so brave, so steady — and at the same time so full of laughter. I glanced at the other photograph, which was evidently of her elder sister, for the likeness between the two was pronounced. But whereas the elder sister's face might have belonged to any young woman, the younger sister's could only have been the product of a rare nature. It stirred in me an indefinable appeal and transformed my doubts of a moment ago into a solid belief that her father had succeeded where others had failed. Across a corner of the snapshot the name 'Noelle' was written in a bold round hand.

Beyond this I knew nothing of the child, nor had I a single clue as to where she might be found. She would be a woman now, and like enough would be fighting a

hard battle for existence. And here was I with what might be a fortune in my hands, a fortune which by every right belonged to these two girls.

By the merest accident their future was in my keeping. What was I going to do about it? A day before I was looking for a job, preferably with a spice of adventure, and here it was, complete in every detail. A wood — a dead body — a chart — relentless enemies and maidens in distress. Could a man ask more?

I threw up my head and laughed. At that moment the telephone bell rang.

It was Dominic Vane.

'I've worked it out,' said he, 'and got the answer to a hair.'

'Well?'

'March the 18th, 1912.'

Sixteen years ago — for sixteen years the body had lain rotting in the undergrowth of Farthing Hackett. I thanked him and turned away. As I reached the head of the staircase, my father called. I went down to the dining-room. One of his books of press cuttings was open before him.

'Read that,' he said.

I read:

Considerable excitement was caused last night at one A.M. by the spectacle of a blazing object in the sky which fell and came to earth near the village of Sompting, Sussex. A number of residents rose from their beds and hurried to the spot to find it was an aeroplane. The entire fabric of the machine was destroyed by fire as also was the body of the pilot — a man unknown.

My father pointed to the next cutting:

Experts have declared that the aeroplane which fell in flames in a field near Sompting was a two-seater Farman. Mystery envelops the affair, since the body of the pilot has not been identified, nor is any information obtainable as to where the machine started from or to whom it belonged. Following a coroner's inquest the remains of the dead airman were buried in Sompting Churchyard.

The date of the first cutting was March 21, 1912.

'Do you think there's any connection in the affair?' my father asked.

I nodded gravely.

'The man whose body I found cashed a cheque for six hundred pounds on March 18, 1912.'

My father opened his eyes very wide.

'So that's what the note-case contained.'

'Not altogether,' I replied.

'What else, then?'

'A fortune,' said I.

10

When the news of my discovery was given to the public, it excited no small interest.

At the inquest the coroner subjected me to a close examination and criticism.

On what authority, he demanded, had I opened the dead man's note-case and examined its contents.

I replied that by so doing I had hoped to establish his identity and that, having found the body, I did not feel justified in leaving valuable property lying in the open.

'In that respect, Commander Shaftoe, you showed good sense,' said he, 'but the proper procedure would

have been to have put the note-case in an envelope and sealed it in the presence of a witness.'

I promised that when next I made a similar discovery I would follow these instructions.

'You will understand, sir,' said I, 'that the affair rattled me, and on that account I may have exceeded the duties of citizenship.'

'In your opinion, Commander, the dead man fell from a German airplane.'

'The revolver, sir, is of a German pattern.'

'You are an expert in the matter of foreign firearms?'

'I was shot by a German revolver at Gallipoli, sir.'

'Very distressing,' said the coroner. 'You have no further theories on the subject?'

'None, sir, with which I would care to weary the court.'

'You may step down.'

I stepped down.

An open verdict was passed.

Outside the court I was buttonholed by reporters. My first inclination was to refuse to give interviews, but on second thoughts I decided on another course. I talked at such length, and so vividly, that those reporters went back to Fleet Street with a very much better story than the facts of the case merited. In one of the evening papers they gave the story streamer headlines, and almost forgot that the nation was on the verge of another great strike.

I had a purpose in talking so abundantly, for publicity seemed the one hope of getting onto the track of the dead man's daughters and finding the keyword to the formula. Before handing the note-case to the au-

thorities, I had extracted the formula, the letter addressed to Frank, and a few of the notes of each nationality. In doing so there is no doubt I was guilty of a serious misdemeanour, but, until I had had a shot at elucidating the mystery, I had no mind to supply the police with material for getting on the right track. By the removal of a hundred francs here, a few marks there, and a small sheaf of dollar bills, I utterly destroyed their chances of dating the accident as I had done through current rates of exchange.

The following morning the London papers rang with the story. It was presented under fantastic captions — 'Sinister war echo' — 'The path of the white pheasant' — 'Dead airman in a wood' — 'Mystery of the Downs' — 'Empty cartridge shell in dead man's revolver.'

The newspapers gave rein to their imaginations, and before nightfall cars were pouring into the neighbourhood, and a stream of sight-seers filed across the frost-bitten fields towards Farthing Hackett. Xavier had become a show place.

I had my own theories about the shot the dead man had fired — theories inspired by the cutting my father had shown me about the flaming aeroplane at Sompington. I believed something of this kind had happened: Somewhere on high the fugitive inventor had suspected that the pilot in charge of the machine was in the pay of his enemies. He may have given an order that was disobeyed. He may have expected to fly north and discovered that he was flying south. A tussle in midair may have arisen. A shot may have been fired which perforated the tank and set the machine afire.

In desperation the inventor may have jumped. He may have been flung out by the pilot. The machine would then have forged on and pitched in the market gardens at Sompting bringing about the death and cremation of the pilot. None of these theories was provable, as both men were beyond the reach of question, but I had little doubt that I was not far short of the mark. Some evidence of treachery must have presented itself during the actual flight, or it is reasonable to suppose the bodies of both men would have been found together in the charred remains of the Farman plane.

I had rung up Dominic a few hours after leaving the coroner's court to beg him on no account to refer to my enquiry of the day before.

'As matter of fact,' I said, 'although with an honest motive, I have done something on the wrong side of the law. If you read the papers you may gather where.'

'Be of stout heart,' said he; 'I looked up the figures myself, so you have nothing to fear.'

'Good man,' said I.

'Anything doing,' he asked tentatively — 'worth doing, I mean?'

'Might be,' I replied. 'Why?'

'No reason, 'cept that I'm thinking of knocking off work for a quarter, and if you can suggest something lively in the way of a change ——'

'It's not unlikely I might be able to do that,' I replied.

'Don't forget, then.'

I promised I would not forget — since of all the men I know, my father excepted, there was none better

equipped in the way of courage and gaiety than Dominic Vane. Not only was he a stranger to fear, but he was possessed of a first-class intelligence — which is a rare combination.

I felt the better for the knowledge that, if anything developed out of the startling discovery I had made, I could count upon Dominic to bear me company.

My father, who had pronounced opinions on the rights of private ownership, was in a fine rage at the invasion of his property by the sight-seers. Had I not persuaded him otherwise, he would have spent the day that followed the newspaper reports of the affair in slinging trespassers off his property.

‘Prying jackanapes!’ he complained. ‘Stamping down my plough and wasting my hands’ time asking questions!’

‘I know how you feel, Guv’nor,’ I replied, ‘but I can’t help hoping that out of this crowd some one will turn up to put me on the right track.’

‘Track to where?’ he demanded. ‘To a fortune that doesn’t belong to you?’

‘Perhaps,’ said I; ‘but also to these two youngsters in the photographs.’

He nodded and scratched his stubbly beard.

‘Nice straight girls — the young ’un especially. Good eyes. Yes, it’s rough on them.’

‘It is rough.’

‘I said so, and but for that I’d have exploded those half-truths of yours in court yesterday and left you to face the consequences.’

In matters where women are concerned he was inspired with a knightliness not of this age.

'But I don't like half-truths, Bob,' he added growlingly.

I thought it wise to turn the talk.

I said, almost to myself:

'That younger girl, Noelle, I wonder — she may be married by now.'

He span round and faced me.

'Get that idea out of your head! Losh! You'll want some kind o' expectation to spur you on in a madcap game o' this kind.'

I laughed a trifle awkwardly.

'Look here,' I complained, 'I'm not looking for a wife.'

'How do you know? How do any of us know? In the mighty scheme o' things man was put into the world to find the proper mate who'd bring forth his children. That's a finer aim and object than bringing forth synthetic petrol. It fell to your lot to find that poor fellow's body — and find that photograph of the girl with good, straight eyes. Who are you to say that you weren't chosen for an object?'

Probably he would have gone on in the same vein, but at that moment the front doorbell rang, and, following his customary habit of doing all things himself, he did not wait for the servant to answer it, but strode from the room. I heard his great voice booming.

'If you've come here to satisfy your curiosity, the sooner you take yourself off the better.'

The voice that answered sounded by comparison mild as milk.

'I hardly know how to reply to you, sir, save that in search of Nature's truths and beauties all artists are

curious. I have no other curiosity with which to reproach myself.'

'So you call yourself an artist, eh?'

'On the contrary, sir, I leave that to my patrons. I am content to call myself a workman in colours.'

From the silence that followed I judged my father to have been somewhat taken aback.

'If you intend to use your colours to reproduce the spot where a dead man was found,' said he, 'I recommend you look for a better subject.'

'I fear we are talking at cross-purposes,' was the reply. 'The last thing I should wish would be to perpetuate anything with gloomy associations. Am I to assume, sir, you have sustained a loss in the household?'

'You have read your papers, I take it?'

'With so many mysteries of Nature unrevealed, I have no leisure for newspaper reading.'

'H'm!' said my father; 'then what brought you here?'

'I was attracted, sir, by the exterior beauties of this old house, and was about to ask your leave to make a sketch of it to embody in a series of Sussex scenes that I am engaged upon.'

'But it's nearly dark,' said my father. 'You can't paint this time o' day.'

'That is true, but I hope to obtain permission to make a start to-morrow morning.'

'A start!' my father echoed.

'I am a slow worker. I dare say it would take me three or four days to complete the work.'

My father's face must have assumed an expression of displeasure, for the artist hastily added:

'I assure you I should put you to no inconvenience — except for borrowing a little water from time to time. I should bring my own refreshments, and, as I am blessed with a good circulation, I do not anticipate any ill effects from sitting hour after hour in the cold.'

'Look you here,' said the old man indignantly, 'if I grant you permission to paint my house, it does not include the right to insult my hospitality.'

'But please believe me,' the artist replied, 'I had no wish to offend. Indeed, your hospitality overwhelms me, and if I may, I shall certainly avail myself of it.'

'The sooner the better,' said my father, 'and as I hear the teacups chattering you can make a start at once.'

Without waiting for acceptance or refusal, he possessed himself of the artist's painting gear and satchel, cast it upon a hall chair, and ushered him into the parlour.

'An unexpected guest, Bob,' said he. 'Fraid I mistook him for one of those Paul Prys into that Hackett affair. My name is John Shaftoe, and this is my son Robert.'

'And mine,' said our visitor, 'Warrinder, James Warrinder.'

I will not attempt to conceal the fact that Mr. Warrinder did not prepossess me. He was a slender man, tall, but stooping, with a head that stuck away from his body as though anxious to escape from it altogether. His face was lean and of an unhealthy pallor that belied the boast he had made of a vigorous arterial system. It was in no sense the face of a man accus-

tomed to wintry exposure. His skin might well have been bleached by midnight oil. I noticed that the lobes of his ears were attached to the hinges of his jaw and that when he spoke the ears were constantly twitching. His eyes were almost permanently veiled under lowered lids, fringed with the palest of lashes. It was as though, for very modesty or timidity, he did not trust himself to meet another man's gaze. At the first glimpse I detected that the irises were of a pinkish hazel hue. This I attributed to the light of the falling sun, and it was not until he took off his tweed hat and revealed a head covered with fine-as-floss-silk snow-white hair that I suspected him of albinism.

My father's hospitality was a byword throughout the countryside, but, at such a time, when all my thoughts were bent on the problem I had set myself to solve, I was surprised and annoyed that he should have introduced this creature into our family circle. Intercepting a great wink from the old man, who was standing behind our visitor, I judged that he had a reason that was not yet apparent to me. Just then Anne came into the room to announce that tea was ready.

'Tell the girl to lay another place, my dear, and show Mr. Warrinder where he can get a wash. This is my daughter Anne,' he added.

I could see by Anne's back as she conducted our visitor from the room that she liked him no better than I did. Waiting until they were out of earshot, I made so bold as to criticise the impulse that led to the invitation.

'Have you ever heard of an artist who was an albino?' he replied.

'No, by George,' said I. 'They have no colour sense.'

'Well, then,' said my father, 'what's wrong with offering the poor fellow bed as well as board? In a business of this kind, Bob, everything depends in getting off the mark as and when opportunity arises.'

Anne reappeared.

'That's a nasty piece of work,' she said. 'What's the idea, Dad?'

'Bob'll explain.'

'The idea,' said I, with a sudden inspiration, 'is that you should play chatterbox, Anne, and prattle all kinds of indiscreet nonsense about the Farthing Hackett affair. You might go so far as to say I spent the whole of an afternoon poring over the dead man's note-case behind a locked door.'

'Why?'

'Tell you later,' I whispered, for I heard softly approaching footsteps, 'but don't forget to mention that quite recently I lost my job.'

Anne sighed.

'I suppose,' she said, 'there's a reason for all this, but I don't fancy the job one bit.'

II

Despite her natural reluctance, Anne sustained the character of a little farm gossip to perfection. She simply could not check the tide of her chatter.

'We never see any one here, Mr. Warrinder,' she explained, giggling apologetically, 'except dull friends of father's. Talking to any one intelligent is such a change. Bob finding that skeleton in the wood has given one such heaps to say.'

Warrinder's pinkish eyes wandered over her for a second.

'Why, naturally,' said he, 'and I count myself fortunate to hear the story through such agreeable channels.'

'Wasn't it awful?' she pursued. 'Bob says it was just a bag of bones — an empty husk he called it — with that note-case stuffed to overflowing inside.'

'Remarkable. A remarkable experience. And did you see the note-case, Miss Shaftoe?' Warrinder spoke over the rim of a lifted teacup.

'Oh, yes, but not till Bob had spent hours in his room alone with it.'

Here I intervened.

'Anne, darling, this can be of no interest to our guest. It's all in the papers if he wants to know about it.'

Warrinder gave a nervous gesture.

'As I told your father I do not read the newspapers — and were I to do so their accounts would lack the interest of hearing the story at first hand.'

'Don't bother to be polite in this house,' my father boomed. 'Like other girls, Anne's got too much to say.'

'Ah, pardon me,' said Warrinder gallantly, 'but that is a matter of opinion, Mr. Shaftoe.'

Anne, who was pouting at the reproof, broke into a smile at the implied compliment.

'They always shut me up, Mr. Warrinder, and, when I'm shut, they shut up themselves — so nothing ever gets said. But wasn't it extraordinary Bob finding all that money, the very day after he got axed out

of the navy? If it had been me, I'm certain I would never have said a word about it — would you?'

My father mumbled something about her being a fair specimen of female honesty.

'But even masculine honesty is sometimes elastic in such a case,' said Warrinder, raising a pale eyebrow, and looking at me, then away again. 'I regret to hear you have sustained reverses, Mr. Robert.'

'And I regret,' I replied, scowling at Anne, 'that my misfortunes should be inflicted upon any one else.'

'Oh, please. There is no occasion to regret that. I am sure you have my sincerest sympathy.'

'Thanks,' said I.

'In what particular manner ——' he began, but my father interrupted.

'If you've finished your tea, Anne, sit down at the piano and give Mr. Warrinder a tune. As an artist he'll enjoy that.'

And while Anne played, with a singularly mechanical touch, affected to suit the character, my father and I elaborately steered the conversation as far as possible from the subject upon which we suspected our guest was seeking enlightenment.

'Where are you putting up, Mr. Warrinder?' Father demanded.

Warrinder raised his shoulders.

'It is a matter in which I would be glad of your advice,' said he. 'I travel with my luggage on my back.'

My father rubbed his nose.

'If a hard bed in an attic is any good to you, you're welcome to it,' said he.

Mr. Warrinder deprecated the suggestion with both hands.

‘I wouldn’t think of putting you to so much trouble.’

‘No trouble to air a pair o’ sheets,’ my father replied.

And in this manner Mr. James Warrinder became a guest at Xavier Farm.

12

During the evening, after a short stroll round the farm buildings, our guest had huddled shivering before the great open fireplace.

‘A touch of malaria,’ he complained. ‘I’ll be perfectly all right after a night between the blankets.’

He repeated the statement three or four times before Anne suggested lighting a fire in his room.

‘Not on any account,’ he protested. ‘I have been more than enough trouble already.’ But there was that in the tone of his voice which indicated that a fire would be welcome.

‘Of course you must have one,’ said Anne. ‘I wouldn’t sleep if I thought you were shivering in that damp attic.’ With a smile over her shoulder she ran from the room.

Shortly afterwards we all retired: my father and I accompanying Warrinder aloft to be sure he had everything he needed.

‘Bob,’ said my father, when we had wished our guest good-night and descended to the landing below, ‘Bob, come along to my room for a minute. Yours being just underneath where that beggar is sleeping is not a healthy place to talk in.’

Lighting another candle, he sat down on the bed and kicked off his boots.

'If I were you, Bob,' he said, 'I'd be careful where I kept that paper so long as this beggar is about the place. In my opinion it won't be long before he has a try to get hold of it.'

I nodded.

'I had thought of that already, Father. The formula isn't in the house. I made a copy which I hid in the roof of the old tithe barn.'

'And the original?' he asked.

'Safely hidden,' I replied.

'Then we can sleep with easy minds. Good-night, Bob.'

I had risen at four o'clock the preceding morning to find good hiding-places for the formula and the copy I had made. The original, stuffed into a cigarette tin, I had buried under a millstone which formed the plinth of a sundial. It was rather a famous millstone, for it was reputed to have ground the flour used in the making of Queen Victoria's wedding-cake.

As I took off my clothes preparatory to getting to bed, I heard Warrinder moving about on the floor above, and the metallic rattle of coals being put on the fire. It was evident that he did not mean to let himself get chilly, and I wondered whether he had manœuvred getting a fire so that he could stop up all night without discomfort.

So long as he wore his boots every sound he made was as distinct as though he shared my room. This was explained by the fact that there was no plaster ceiling to separate us, but merely heavy floor boards pegged

down on crossbeams of old oak. Here and there a board had shrunk as much as half an inch from its fellow. Looking up, I could see the flickering light of his fire dancing through the parted seams. Assuming that our visitor had more than an ordinary reason to interest himself in my movements, he could not have asked for better opportunities to study them than the attic afforded. Being a stranger to the house, he was unacquainted with my proximity, and a malicious humour decided me to enlighten him without delay. As I had kicked off my shoes in the passage, it was unlikely he had heard me come into my room, and until my preparations were complete I determined to be as noiseless as possible. Tiptoeing to the corner in which my writing-table stood, I took a sheet of paper, scribbled a few words upon it, and tucked it in an envelope upon which I printed the word 'Formula.' This I put in a cash-box.

While so doing I heard the scrape of a chair above and the complaint of wickerwork as he lowered his body into it.

Moving to the door, I opened it silently, shouted a lusty 'Good-night, Father,' and closed it with a bang.

Once more I heard the wicker chair complain as his body rose out of it. Going to the bedside table, I lit an extra two candles and flashed a glance at the seams in the floor boards just in time to see, and faintly to hear, the blowing-out of his own lights. Once again, but more faintly, I heard the scroop of the chair, after which the flickering from the firelight also disappeared. Evidently my friend, realising that I was just below him, separated only by a floor which had much the

character of a colander, had determined to use the chair as a fire screen.

Sitting down on the end of my bed, where I was pretty sure I was in view, I whistled thoughtfully and rapped my teeth after the fashion of a man who is debating a problem. Then I said 'Yes,' aloud, crossed to my writing-table and returned with the cash-box, which I laid upon my knee and stared at. Assuming that he was watching me, what followed must have bored him excessively. I stared at the cash-box for ages, as though unable to decide what to do with it. At long last I took a bunch of keys from my pocket, unlocked the box, rummaged among the papers and bank-notes it contained, and finally drew forth the envelope which I had put there ten minutes before. Tossing the cash-box on the bed, I went down on my knees, and with a penknife opened a seam in the mattress and tucked the envelope inside. My next job was to search among my kit for an old 'hussif' I had had when on active service. With a rusty needle and a bit of thread, I cobbled up the seam and made all shipshape.

'Now,' said I to myself, 'if that letter vanishes in the immediate future, we shall have a pretty good idea who's got it.'

Having baited the trap, I undressed and went to sleep.

13

I was roused by a stentorian roar from my father.
'Bob! Hulloo there!'

My impression as I sat bolt upright in bed was that it was day. The window-frame behind the cretonne

curtain was silhouetted against a glowing amber light. Jumping up and dragging the curtains aside, I realised the cause — one of the big hayricks fifty yards away was blazing furiously.

Hauling on a pair of bags and grabbing my old shooting-coat, I hared for the staircase and clattered down to the hall. My sister and the female servants were already there with a muster of buckets. The hall door was wide open, and above the roar of the fire I heard my father hallooing for the cowman, the carter, and the hands who lodged in cottages near by. As I went out, he came running toward me.

‘No use trying to get it out,’ he said. ‘We must save the other ricks, though, or the buildings’ll catch.’

As soon as the men joined us, we made a bucket chain from the duck pond and got to work. It was pretty warm work, too, and but for a friendly breeze which fanned the flames away from the neighbouring ricks the whole lot, and probably the farm itself, would have gone up in smoke. Anne got on the telephone to the local fire brigade, and, contrary to usual experience, they showed up with a pump within half an hour of the call.

We had been too busy to give any thought as to the cause of the fire, and it was not until the fire brigade men, the hands, and the rest of us were gathered together before a barrel of beer in the kitchen that the question arose.

‘Ricks don’t catch themselves in a frost,’ said my father. ‘Some one ——’ he stopped, brought his fist down with a crash on the table, and started from the room.

I followed, for the same idea must have come into our heads at the same time. We went up to the top floor three steps at a time and threw open the attic door.

The embers of the fire still glimmered in the grate, shedding a faint glow upon the unslept-in bed and empty chair. Of our visitor there was no sign; even the satchel which had contained his modest equipment was gone.

My father stared at me and nodded.

'Fired the rick and got away in the fuss,' he said. 'But dang it, boy, why?'

We found the answer in my bedroom, neatly expressed by a slit in the mattress, and some tufts of horsehair scattered on the floor.

'But, Bob, you were never fool enough to hide the formula in that place!' he demanded.

'Not the formula,' I replied, 'but a letter I prepared before I went to bed, which contained the simple phrase, "I rather doubt if you are up to the job."''

My father gave a grim smile, and said:

'That joke has cost me as clean a rick of hay as any in Sussex.' He became suddenly serious, and added: 'But it proves you're up against a tough racket. From now onward, my boy, I'd get into the habit of walking in the middle of the road and keeping your eyes open. Unless I'm mistaken, there'll be some lively happenings in the near future.'

I may be wrong, but I had a positive impression that there was a gleam of satisfaction in the old man's eyes as he faced round and marched from the room.

By the first post next morning I received two letters. One was a communication from the World United Oil Company to say that Mr. Oscar Kahnet had been re-considering the visit I had paid him on the 9th inst., and had a proposition to make which he would outline if I called in person at the earliest date convenient to myself. It was not until I had read the second letter that I attached any particular significance to it.

The second letter was written on foreign note-paper with unmistakably foreign ink. It bore a Newhaven postmark which suggested that it had been brought over on the night packet from France, and posted on this side. The handwriting was sensitive but deliberate — rather an unusual writing. The single sheet of paper the envelope contained bore no address. It was headed Farthing Hackett. Below were written the words:

Will you see me? Boat leaves Newhaven for Dieppe 10 P.M. Be smoking a cigarette and drop it in the water accidentally as you come down the gangway. Please burn this.

There was no signature, but I was utterly sure that the letter was from Noelle. I had handed over the photographs of the two girls to the police and so I had no means of comparing the written characters of her name with those on the sheet before me. Had I done so, since she had been a child at the time, there is little likelihood there would have been much resemblance between the two. The conviction, however, was solid in my mind from my first glance. That same 'feel' of confidence mounted my finger-tips as when first I had touched the envelope containing the formula.

Only my father was in the room and I handed him the letter to read.

'The girl?' he said.

'That's what I think,' I nodded.

'You'll go?'

'Yes.'

He was silent for a moment, biting the mouthpiece of his pipe ruminatively. At last he said:

'I think you're right. Of course it might be a trap, but' — he picked up the letter and scanned it again — 'there's something honest in the writing.' He held the letter over the fire. 'Have you done with it?'

'I suppose so.'

I rather disliked the letter being burnt and I watched it blaze up, curl, and char disconsolately. Once more I picked up the communication from the World United, and instantly wondered how they knew where to find me. When I had called at the offices I had neither left, nor been asked to leave an address. The explanation was, of course, simple enough. They had seen my address in the paper in the report of the coroner's proceedings. Oscar Kahnet had sent me away with a very positive indication that my services were not wanted. Why, then, had he changed his opinion? Nothing I had said in court was calculated to convince him that I would be a valuable servant to an oil company. As my thoughts reached that point, I spoke the word 'oil company' half aloud.

'What's that?' my father demanded, and, with a cock of the eyebrow that seemed to say 'May I?' crossed to my side and read the letter.

'Oscar Kahnet,' he repeated. Then, looking at me, 'What were the initials in that scrawl the aviator wrote just before he died?'

A pringle of excitement stirred under my hair.

'You're right,' I said. '"O. K."'

The old man filled a pipe thoughtfully.

'This goes deep, Bob,' he said. 'We may, of course, be letting our imaginations run wild — but the inference isn't altogether fantastic.'

'But look here, Guv'nor,' said I, 'Kahnet is one of the biggest men in the city of London. There's a capital of millions at the back of the World United.'

'Just so,' he nodded, 'and on that account, if on no other, it would scarcely be to their advantage to see the motor-spirit market flooded with a cheap substitute. I wonder if our friend of last night was an ambassador of the firm.'

I shook my head.

'Scarcely. This letter must have been mailed before five-thirty to reach us by the first post. That rick-burner didn't show up until after six.'

He nodded.

'Which seems to point to there being more than one lot of scalawags in the business.'

I looked at my watch.

'The sooner we know it the better,' I said. 'I'll take the car up to town straightaway.' As an afterthought I added, 'Look here, Guv'nor, I may get Dominic Vane to bring it back and put in a few days with you at the farm.'

My father scowled.

'I'm not as old as that,' he grumbled.

'As a pal of mine you won't refuse him a bed,' I replied, 'and he'll make a bit of company for Anne.'

It was not our custom to make farewells and it rather astonished me when the old man slipped an arm round my shoulders and gave me a hearty squeeze.

'God take care of you,' he said.

I put a few things in a bag and took an old tweed ulster from a peg in the hall.

'Where are you going?' Anne demanded.

'If I don't answer that, then neither soft words nor torture will persuade you to reveal the secret,' I answered, and, giving her a kiss, went off in the direction of the garage.

The snap of frost had stiffened up the bearings and I had to swing on the handle like a navvy before I could get a shot out of the engine. Pausing for breath, I chanced to look up in the direction of the downs. From a gorse patch the best part of a mile away two bright spots of light twinkled at me — brilliantly reflecting the early morning sun. A pair of field glasses, I thought, belonging to one of the rubber-necks drawn by morbid interest to the spot. I turned once more to the car and this time got her firing.

At the end of the avenue the road takes a sharp left-hand turn and follows the line of the downs across a terrain of ploughed fields. It is a narrow track, without hedges and barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass. I had covered half of it when I saw before me a harrow lying deserted in the roadway. Nobody appeared to be in charge of the thing, nor was there a horse in the shafts. It seemed to have been dragged off

the plough and left marooned in the road. There was nothing very surprising in that, for the yokels in that part of the country are simple folk with a great lack of imagination. Assuming the draught horse had gone lame, the average ploughman would think no harm to leave the harrow where it was and lead the horse back to the farm.

Running up to within a few yards, I jumped out of the car and picking up the shafts began to manhandle it off the road. I had scarcely lifted the shafts when something whined past my ear and, chipping a flint in the field beyond, sailed on, moaning shrilly. From the downs came a faint but clear crack.

Dropping the shafts, I looked up to the skyline and, as I did so, with a whirr as of bees, a dozen bullets pecked at the ground to right and left of where I stood. I give you my word I didn't stay long after that. There was not a vestige of cover and it was only by luck the machine gun failed to get me with the first spray. I ducked my head and ran, leapt aboard the car and letting the engine 'rev.' in low gear, looped over the ploughed field and regained the road on the far side of the deserted harrow. But for the frost I should have been bogged to the axles, but the ground was just crisp enough to bear for the few instants it took to cross it. Until I was back in the road on the other side I was too excited to pay heed to the attentions of the machine gun half a mile away in the gorse patch. It may have been that the man in charge was not a real professor at his job, but the way the earth was chopped up all over the place proved that he was, at least, doing his best. Until I had covered the last yard of that

stretch of open road, he was despatching nickel valentines after me with unsparing liberality.

When you haven't been shot over for a matter of ten years, the experience, though stimulating, is apt to make you resentful. If the subtle attentions had been bestowed upon me with the idea of discouraging any further attempt to concern myself with the affairs of the dead man of Farthing Hackett, I can confidently say that the effect produced was the reverse. I swore by the steering-wheel under my hand that, come what might, I would go through with the business either to a honeyed or a bitter end.

15

On my journey to town I met with no other adventure. I drove to Dominic's office in Old Broad Street, and had the good fortune to find him in.

Dominic was wearing a suit of rough tweeds and a pair of brown brogue shoes, painfully in evidence by reason of the fact that he had parked them on his office table. A huge briar pipe hung from the corner of his mouth. His general appearance was dejected and sorrowful.

When first we met he was disguised as the captain of a tramp steamer — supposedly neutral — and was justly elated at having drawn the monthly prize for 'soaking' submarines against a field of competitors as long as your leg.

The change in him was pathetic.

His greeting, 'Isn't life awful!' typified his condition of mind.

'Awful, perhaps — precarious, certainly,' I replied,

and told him of the little send-off I had had earlier in the morning.

He took his pipe from his mouth, lowered his feet to the floor, and stared at me incredulously and said:

'You ask me to believe they popped at you with a machine gun?'

I nodded.

'What did you do about it?'

'What does one generally do when sprayed by that kind of gat?'

'One bunks.'

'Just so,' said I.

Life seemed to be stealing back into his features. 'Where do I come in?' he asked.

'Well,' I replied, 'I rather fancy I might like you to take the car back to Xavier this evening.'

'That's nice,' he said.

'And stay there for a bit,' I added.

'Looks as if I might stay there for good,' he laughed, 'if your pal with the machine gun gets the ranges fixed.'

I suggested he might haul in in the dark. He suggested hearing something more about it. Satisfying myself that no one was about, I cracked the egg.

I have never seen a man brighten up as Dominic brightened under the influence of that diet. He fairly expanded.

'That machine-gun group look to me a bit heavy-footed. You know, where they walk they sink. That kind generally work out their own undoing. But the other feller, Oscar Kahnet, is a different proposition. He has the looks of a captive balloon come to earth — but up here' — and he tapped his forehead — 'is a

very high-class equipment. If you are right in assuming he's in this business, he won't let you out of his sight until he's got you where he wants you. If I were you I'd give him a miss, and float by sky to France, while the floating's good.'

I shook my head.

'Not until I've sized up the situation, Dom.'

He leant back in his chair. 'Now, wait a bit, and let's think it out.'

We thought it out, in detail, and made an appointment to meet at the Sports Club in Saint James's Square at three o'clock.

16

Having regard to the difficulties opposed to my first meeting with Oscar Kahnet, the reception accorded me at the offices of the World United was overpowering.

I had scarcely given my name to the hall porter before I was bundled into a lift and borne aloft. Every one seemed out of breath at the sight of me. The assistant manager, Mr. Cole, whisked me down the narrow passage and projected me into Oscar Kahnet's presence.

'He's here, sir — he's here!' he gasped, and, closing the door behind him, beat a hasty retreat.

Oscar Kahnet was seated in the big armchair, as before, but this time his face was uncovered and he betrayed no disposition to go to sleep. He did not offer to shake hands, but greeted me with a welcoming smile inspired by genuine enthusiasm.

'There is no surer way of winning my approval,' he fluted, 'than the ability in a man to make up his mind

at a moment's notice. You, Commander Shaftoe, have shown yourself of that character.'

I humped my shoulders.

'I made up my mind to call, sir,' said I, 'but my resolutions do not extend further.'

'Why should they?' he replied. 'A man who knows his value does not squander his services idly.'

'As to that,' said I, 'I am relying upon you to assess my value.'

He nodded agreeably, and produced from his pocket a draft contract in typescript.

'Cast your eye over this and let me have your opinion,' said he.

The contract read:

In consideration of a salary of three thousand pounds per annum and bonuses, I, Robert Shaftoe, late Commander R.N., do hereby agree to serve the World United Oil Company in any capacity I may think fit for a duration of time only to be determined by myself, or the liquidation of the Company.

And in further consideration of the above-mentioned salary and bonuses, I do declare and avow that I will enter into no undertaking or business dealings whatever that might prejudice the interests of the said Company. And that my services will include the handing over to them of any and all information valuable to the interests of the Company that I may now possess or become possessed of in the future.

If there had been a shadow of doubt in my mind as to the identity of the O. K. referred to in the dead airman's letter, this document disposed of it.

I looked up and found that Oscar Kahnet was watching me fixedly.

'You will understand,' said he, 'that the term "bo-

nus" is elastic and may be taken to include practically any sum of money you might reasonably demand. At the moment there is no one whose services we are more eager to employ. You are so placed to-day as to be able to command a position of financial security that will relieve the future of all anxiety.'

'I am not sure that a certain amount of anxiety is not of advantage to a man,' said I.

'In some cases, yes,' Oscar Kahnet allowed, 'but not in yours.'

'I don't follow.'

He put his finger-tips together and stared at the ceiling.

'Let us assume you were so rash as to reject my offer. Do you know what would happen? Life for you would develop a condition of such continued anxiety that the alternative to life would be positively welcome.'

I grinned.

'I was given a sample of that alternative early this morning, through the barrel of a machine gun.'

With an exclamation of sudden alarm, Oscar Kahnet came to his feet. It was the first time I had seen him standing and the size of his gigantic body amazed me. In that tiny room it was overwhelming.

'Already!' he cried, 'already!' And without a word of explanation lumbered from the room. Two minutes later he was back again and his calm had returned with him.

'I have taken precautions,' he said, 'to avoid the danger of your meeting with any recurrence of your morning's adventure — at least for the present.'

'Am I, then, to understand that you were responsible for it?'

Oscar Kahnet flapped one of his small pale hands.

'Dear me, what a tiresome and silly question! Should I be making these proposals to you if that were so?'

There was logic in the reply which I acknowledged with a bow, but added:

'On the other hand, I have evidence that similar methods were at one time employed by a gentleman with the same initials as yourself.'

A flicker of interest came into his eyes.

'You are well informed,' he said. 'Perhaps in the past I was more summary in my dealings than I am to-day. It is not to be wondered at. In the year 1912 this concern was in its infancy. The appearance upon the market of anything calculated to oppose its progress was a danger one could not afford to treat ceremoniously.'

I smiled.

'I would remind you, too, that I was, to employ a metaphor, in the position of a parent, Shaftoe, a parent with a young child to protect.'

'There was another man who had a child — two children — to protect. How did he fare?' I asked sweetly.

'He committed suicide,' was the answer, 'and the weapon that killed him was an obstinate pride. But for that he might have been one of the richest men alive to-day. He might, in short, be enjoying the privileges I am now offering to you.'

'Instead of which,' said I, 'he and his secret have lain hidden in a wood for sixteen years.'

Oscar Kahnet nodded.

'How much better for the world,' said he, 'if it had been for sixteen centuries!'

'The world,' I countered, 'or the World United?'

'The two are inseparable,' he replied. 'Are you aware that, one way and another, in production, distribution, and transport, there are nearly a million employees on the Company's pay-roll? As to the number of our shareholders I have but to remind you of our enormous capital to prove that in every country on the face of the globe are investors, great and small, whose fortunes depend upon our financial security.' His manner became grave. 'Now, Shaftoe, if anything were to happen to undermine that security, every one of those employees and every one of those investors would become a potential, if not an actual enemy of the person responsible for providing the danger.'

I was searching my brain for a reply when I recalled that other letter I had received by the morning's post.

'It was, then, with a view to safeguarding these people's interests that you took the action that resulted so disastrously for that poor inventor?'

Oscar Kahnet nodded.

'For that reason and no other.'

'Sheer altruism,' said I. 'You put up a fine case for your company, Kahnet, but it seems to me these youngsters have a good case, too — that hasn't had a hearing.'

'For all I know they may be dead,' he said.

'On the other hand, they may be alive.'

'In which case, Shaftoe, it would be a cruel act to reintroduce into their lives a hope that could only end

in tragedy. Use your reason — sign that paper — and if it will satisfy your conscience to try, afterwards, to trace these girls and make them some compensation, the resources of the Company will be at your disposal.'

'That is all very plausible and nice,' said I, 'but what right have I to sell a secret that doesn't belong to me?'

'There is an adage,' said he, 'that findings are keepings.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'and it has landed many a man in the lock-up. No, no, Kahnet, that won't do. It isn't up to me to sell anything.'

Oscar Kahnet's eyes narrowed dangerously.

'It may be that you have nothing to sell. The formula is in code — alphabetical code; without the keyword that code is meaningless.'

But for the careless use of the adjective alphabetical I might never have realized that this was a shot in the dark. As I have already said, the formula was in numerical code. Thanks to his mistake I did not betray the slightest surprise.

'In that case,' said I, 'you can safely allay your parental anxieties and let the whole thing rip.'

I do not think he was altogether deceived — or altogether convinced. His reply was characteristic.

'It is not my habit to leave anything to chance.'

'I see,' said I. 'You buy as you shoot — in the dark.'

'Exactly.'

I stood for a moment in thought, then reached out for the door handle.

'This matter is too big to decide in a hurry. I'll think it over and return in a few days.'

'It were wiser to decide at once,' he said. 'There are

others besides myself, and their attitude toward you is not so forbearing.'

I had, already, proof of that.

'I am relying upon your promise,' I said, 'to protect me from their attentions.'

Oscar Kahnet watched me in silence as I left the room and passed down the narrow passage. I had not expected to be allowed to leave without opposition. My uninterrupted departure from the offices of the World United struck me as a trifle flat. Mr. Cole bowed as I passed him by, and the hall porter touched his cap respectfully.

The branch of Cosways Bank in which I kept my accounts was on the corner immediately facing the World United Building, and, as I needed to cash a cheque, I crossed to the Bank and stayed for a few minutes talking with the manager, Mr. Belton, in his private office. Returning to the other side of the road, I stood on the pavement regarding my ancient automobile with sensations of doubt and perplexity and wondering what precautions Oscar Kahnet had taken to avoid a recurrence of the attack that had been made upon me under the downs. While doing so I felt a light touch on the sleeve and heard some one whisper:

'Quick work, Mr. Shaftoe, but you saved yourself by a narrow margin.'

I swung round, but the pavement was crowded with business men hurrying to lunch. Any one of a score of men might have been the individual who addressed me. The remark was cryptic, to say the least, and as I drove away I wondered what it could mean.

There was a traffic block at the corner of Wellington

Street, and I happened to see one of the midday posters of the *Evening News*. It read, 'World United's amazing deal with young naval commander.'

Whistling to the newsboy, I bought a copy of the paper and read in the 'stop press' column:

We are informed that Oscar Kahnet, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the World United Oil Company has entered into a contract involving an enormous salary and bonus with Commander Robert Shaftoe, late R.N., whose name recently appeared in this paper in connection with his discovery of the dead body of a German aviator in a wood in Sussex.

It is rumoured that Shaftoe is bringing to the Company an invention of the utmost importance.

It was not until a policeman was shouting enquiries as to whether I intended to leave my car in the middle of the road as a permanent memorial to a person of unsound mind, that I realised the subtlety of the manoeuvre. In publishing a statement that I had accepted his offer, Oscar Kahnet would conclusively convince those gentlemen with the machine gun that they were too late. He had, in short, supplied me with a greater safeguard than I could have enjoyed had I been protected by the Brigade of Guards.

17

Driving into Saint James's Square, from Pall Mall, I saw Dominic's Bentley with himself at the wheel drawn up by the kerb on the southeast corner. I passed him without a flicker of mutual recognition and parked my car on the north side of the Square. Entering the Sports Club, I waited in the vestibule two or three

minutes until Dominic arrived. He had not parked his car, but had left it immediately before the club entrance.

Our dialogue was of the briefest, and while talking we made a swift exchange of hats and overcoats.

'You were sleuthed into the Square by some fellows in a Sunbeam. They have parked alongside your old bus.'

He pushed a handful of letters into my hand as he spoke.

'Be opening 'em as you go down the steps. It'd look natural.'

I buttoned his coat and turned up the collar in the manner he had been wearing it.

'If you make the farm, Dom, keep indoors and don't show yourself,' I said. 'For the present those gunmen are unlikely to worry you.'

He looked surprised and even troubled.

'Read the *Evening News* if you want to know why,' I added. 'There's a bit about me in it. An utter lie — but rather a useful one. So long.'

I went down the steps of the club reading a letter, got aboard Dominic's car, and drove away. A couple of men talking together on the pavement barely wasted a glance in my direction.

BOOK II

I

THE night packet from Newhaven to Dieppe was somewhat crowded and, unable to get a private cabin, I rolled myself up in a blanket and slept in the saloon. From the universal lack of interest shown in me it was clear that my simple exchange with Dominic had aroused no one's suspicion. He and I were much of a height and, as it was arranged that he should stay in the club until the approach of nightfall, I felt fairly confident that he would drive off in my car without giving away his identity to the watchers.

But for the fact that we had organized this rather puerile substitution *before* my interview with Oscar Kahnet, it would scarcely have had a chance of succeeding. That we brought it off was, I am sure, due to the fact that no one was expecting anything of that nature to happen so soon.

I could imagine Dominic tooling down to Sussex in my old bus with the faithful Sunbeam in attendance. To have bluffed Oscar Kahnet even in so trivial a manner was encouraging, and I fell asleep feeling fairly satisfied with the day's work.

About three o'clock I was roused by the feel of harbour water. I remained in my bunk, since only passengers for the Paris train left the boat at that early hour. The rest, myself among them, remained on board until eight-thirty. A steward lent me a razor and a shaving-brush with about two hairs in it, with which

I contrived to make my toilet. Subsequently he brought me a cup of tea and a slice of thick bread and butter which I fear had met with a misadventure, for it boasted more hairs than the shaving-brush.

Refreshed and fortified, I went on deck and watched the pearly mists melt from the harbour and the tall white houses with their shutters of blue and green shake off the vapours of the night.

A sprinkling of porters in blue dungarees, a customs officer very gallantly uniformed and braided, an R.A.C. man with a small boy in attendance busy over the landing of a British car, were the only figures upon the quay.

Two or three automobiles for hire stood in the cobbled roadway beyond the railway lines, their chauffeurs, clustered at a table of a mean café, enjoying breakfast.

At half-past eight precisely, a gangway was hoisted up from the quay and we prepared to go ashore.

Most of the passengers had departed by the Paris Express, and, with myself, there were not more than a dozen left aboard. The absence of any interesting or attractive individual on the quay had rather damped my spirits, and I was beginning to suspect a hoax. However, I lit a cigarette, according to instructions, and let the rest precede me before stepping onto the gangway. About halfway down I stumbled, and the cigarette fell with a tiny hiss into the harbour water.

An official took my landing card as I stepped onto the quay, and directed me toward the customs house.

'I have no luggage and nothing to declare,' I said, and moved away disconsolately. I had barely moved a yard, however, when the R.A.C. man, deserting the

car which had been occupying his attention, came up and touched his cap.

'The Hotchkiss, sir,' said he. 'The chauffeur knows where to drive.'

That was all. He saluted again and turned away.

Since there were only three cars to choose from and two were Rénaulds, there was no chance of making a mistake. I walked up to the Hotchkiss and tooted the horn.

One of the three chauffeurs, deserting his coffee, came bustling toward me. He was a stoutish, amiable man with a red face and even redder moustache. Speaking volubly, he informed me that it was 'beautiful times but not hot.' He besought me to enter the car, which I did.

A moment later we were bumping over the cobbles in a southerly direction. As the enterprise was of a very speculative nature, I took particular heed of the route we followed. We had travelled barely ten kilometres when he slapped on his brakes and turned abruptly from the road into a kind of orchard garden at the foot of which a shallow stream chattered over stones.

2

I had marked the name of the place before we entered the gates: the Auberge du Clos Garnier. From the number of white tables piled up one on top of another under the trees, and from a pavilion situated by the entrance, I concluded that the *auberge*, in the summer season, was a popular resort of motorists. In winter livery it looked a trifle forlorn and deserted.

As the car drew up on a crescent of gravel shaded by a number of massive chestnut trees, the host of the *auberge*, his wife, a concierge, and a very small boy in a pink smock came out of the house and approached me.

M. le patron, who appeared to be a sick man, was painfully thin and shadowy, and gave the impression that his bones rattled as he walked. I subsequently discovered that this startling effect was produced by a tin of hard lozenges from which he never allowed himself to be parted. Madame, his wife, was of a different character: a brisk, bustling woman with a shrewd tongue and capable hands. About the corners of her eyes were lines of a merry humour, but I imagine, with the business of the little hotel dependent exclusively upon her activities, that she had little time for the exchange of pleasantries.

Of the concierge I have no very clear impression. I associate him only with a murmured 'Pardon' and a slightly disappointed expression at discovering that I had no luggage.

The child, a queer little scrap with a voice like a bird, chirped, 'M'sieur, M'sieur,' as I jumped out of the car and was the first of the trio to shake hands. Subsequently both madame and her husband offered me a like courtesy, before enquiring the nature of my needs.

I hardly knew what to reply, for I was very sure that my arrival was unexpected, and I had no notion as to when or where I was to meet my correspondent. However, I agreed readily to madame's suggestion that I should partake of a cup of chocolate and a *galette*.

Talking volubly, she led me into the house, the lower

floor of which was in the nature of a kitchen café of the most charming simplicity.

One end was entirely occupied by an immense stove whose surface was polished to the brilliance of a mirror. For furniture there were three or four tables covered with American cloth very busy in design, and a long counter with the inevitable rack of picture postcards, a few boxes of matches, and Maryland cigarettes. Behind the counter, occupied in casting up rows of figures and entering the totals in a ledger, was a girl, but as she did not look up when I came in, and sat with a window immediately behind her, I saw nothing of her features.

Madame bade me seat myself and bestirred herself at the stove over preparations for my repast.

‘Monsieur is staying at Dieppe?’ she said.

‘Perhaps,’ I said; ‘I have not yet decided. I might even wish to stay here for a night or so, madame.’

This she assured me could be arranged. True, it was the off season and the guest house in the garden was not in use, but there was a very proper room upstairs that I could occupy and welcome.

To my enquiry she responded that there were no other guests.

‘At this season we are dead,’ she said. ‘An occasional *ouvrier* will take a glass of cider, and that is all.’

The prospects were getting duller every moment.

‘In the spring and the summer there is always a fine company who come for the fishing.’

She was enlarging upon the excellence of the sport afforded to anglers when my attention was attracted by the sound of wheels on the gravel. Looking up ex-

pectantly, I saw the car which had brought me from Dieppe pass through the gates and vanish along the road. Since I had neither paid the chauffeur nor given him any instructions, his departure was surprising.

Madame set a steaming jug of chocolate before me and whisked a piping-hot *galette* from the oven.

'The *galette* is the specialty of the house,' she told me, and lest my enjoyment of it should be distracted by conversation, she took herself off to the outbuildings, where I heard her voice shrilly ordering the concierge as to this and that.

Madame's personality must have been a shade overwhelming, for with her departure I had a distinct sense of being alone. I was reminded that this was not so by the sound of a hand thumping a pad of blotting-paper on a book, followed by the scroop of a chair leg on bare boards.

Looking up, I saw that the little bookkeeper, who had been so busily engaged when I came in, had tilted back her chair and with her head resting against the window-pane was scrutinising me thoughtfully. The window itself was bayed and the light now poured in upon her features from left and right. She was sucking the end of her pen, and her eyes, like two pools in a rock, rested upon mine with a steadiness that was most unsettling.

Slowly she withdrew the pen, and a smile flickered over her mouth. Then, in the purest English, she said: 'Fun, isn't it?'

I had been taken so utterly by surprise that I could hardly say a thing. All I could manage was:

'Then you are ——?'

'I'm Noelle.'

'Amazing,' I said; then, pointing at the counter — 'But all this — being here ——?'

'I work here — it's my job. Madame of the *caisse*, they call me. That's cashier, you know.'

'Then it isn't just for this meeting that you ——?'

She shook her head — the smoothest head I have ever seen.

'For bread and butter,' she said, and again the smile flickered. 'It was nice of you to come — wasn't it?'

'What else could I do?'

'Nothing,' she replied, 'since you are not a business man.'

It is a silly confession, but I felt almost piqued.

'Why do you say I am not a business man?'

'A business man would have nothing to gain and perhaps much to lose by coming. A business man — I mean the nasty kind — would have sold while he had the chance.'

'How do you know I haven't?' I asked.

'You are here,' she answered simply.

I couldn't escape a sense of gratitude that my arrival forestalled the delivery of the English papers. The copy of the *Evening News* I had bought the day before was still in my pocket. I pulled it out and laid it on the counter before her.

'Read that,' I said.

She read it unwaveringly, except for the smallest imaginable twitch at the corners of her mouth. Then she folded the paper and gave it back.

'All right,' she said. 'I've nothing to say. It's the sort of chance hardly any one would refuse.'

'A fortune, Miss Noelle.'

'Of course. But when you came in I thought you were different, that's all.'

'How different?'

'Just different — an obstinate, fighting sort of person.'

Once more her eyes looked into mine diviningly, and suddenly she said: 'You didn't sell at all. You're only pretending.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'Though it baffles me how you guessed it.'

'I can feel when anything's untrue,' she said; and with the most disarming gesture put both her hands into one of mine that lay upon the counter.

I imagine I was in an impressionable mood, for that simple action sent a thrill all through me. From the snapshot of Noelle as a child, I had looked to find no ordinary woman, and this young, frank girl, with the steadfast eyes and that amazingly sensitive mouth, unsettled me in the strangest way. That she had taken me on trust made an appeal that lodged itself in my heart.

I shut my fingers over her small hands and held them tight.

'What a wonder you are!' I said, and would have said more, but that I heard madame approaching. Turning to the rack of picture postcards, I selected two or three and dropped some sous upon the counter.

'I find that mademoiselle is English,' said I. 'Perhaps, if she is not too occupied, madame would allow her to show me anything of interest the village may contain.'

'But certainly,' said madame, who, being a French woman, was ready to employ all the resources of the establishment for the entertainment of a guest.

3

I ordered lunch for one o'clock and strolled in the garden until Noelle was ready to join me. Presently she came, wearing a queer old-fashioned Inverness cape of black-and-white check. Her splendid little head atop of that odd garment looked at once delicious and absurd.

'Let's come over here and talk,' said she, and led me through a privet hedge and over a wooden bridge which spanned a by-pass of the main stream. Beyond was a shallow lake — little more than a pond — surrounded by leafless trees. In the water, which was crystal clear, a number of trout cruised or lay as still as sitting birds.

She looked up at me. 'Are you a fisherman? I hope so. Father was a wonderful fisherman. His best ideas came to him on river-banks.'

'Here?' I asked. 'This river?'

She shook her head.

'No — in the Pyrenees — not far from Carcassonne. We ran there when they began to pester us.'

'What was your father's name?'

Her eyebrows went up. 'You don't know? I suppose there was nothing to tell you. Yet you knew about me.'

'There was a letter, half finished, in his note-case. It was addressed to a man named Frank.'

'To Frank? Poor Frank. He was killed in the war. Shot in the back. Yet he wasn't running away. They

thought he knew too much, I expect. Father's name was Wilbur — Michael Wilbur.'

'Noelle Wilbur,' I repeated to myself. 'Yes, I like that.'

'Father used to call me Bécassine,' said she.

'That's French for snipe,' I said.

She nodded.

'Why on earth?' I laughed.

'It had something to do with having big brown eyes, twiggy legs, and being fond of playing in the mud.' She added, 'I've got out of it.'

'And your sister?' I asked. 'Tell me about her.'

Down came her brows, hard and straight. 'No,' she said. 'Except one thing. Her name was Jura. It was she who killed Father.'

I sat up at that — saying, 'But you're wrong ——' Noelle shook her head.

'It was because of her, then. Jura couldn't fight — she funk'd things. She wanted Father to take a price to forget his invention.'

'Forget it? You mean they didn't intend to use the formula?'

'They wanted to destroy it,' she said. 'At least that's what the big group wanted. The others were just money-getters and crooks.'

'And your sister Jura, what did she do?'

'Father trusted us and used to tell us all his plans. He had gone to England to see a man named Groffe, but I don't think they can have agreed because I know he was going to try to reach America and sell his invention there. Our mother was an American. Father was hiding somewhere in Wiltshire — I've forgotten just

where — I was only quite a kid. The big group got hold of Jura and she told them where he was hiding — the day before his death.'

'But look here,' said I, 'she couldn't have foreseen.'

'She defended herself that way. She said she thought, if they got in touch with him, that he would be bound to give in.'

'Where is she now?' I asked.

Noelle shook her head.

'Somewhere in the South. She married an awful little *croupier* person. I haven't seen her for years. It was ages before I learnt the truth about what she had done. Then I walked out.'

'How old were you?'

'Twelve.'

'Where did you walk?' I asked.

'Oh, ever so far. I got a job with a baker. It was an awfully funny job. I had to carry loaves to the shepherds' cottages up in the hills. Have you ever seen a Pyrenees loaf? They were almost as big as I was. The shepherds' wives were very particular.'

'And you were twelve!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, but that's grown up for a girl, and it wasn't a bad job. I ought to have stuck to it.'

'Didn't you?' I asked.

'No. A French artist turned up and wanted to paint me holding out some buttercups to a cow. I told him it was all wrong. Basque peasants don't feed their cows by hand. They sit on heaps of stones by the roadside and stare at nothing while the cows feed themselves. He was awfully impressed by that — French artists

are impressionable. He asked me to go to Paris with him, and tried to kiss me. It was rather awkward, and in stamping around I trod on a tube of Rose Dorée, which had cost him thirty francs, so he gave up trying to kiss me and screamed out that girls like me were the ruin of men. I ran away then, and left him trying to scrape up the paint with a palette knife. Then I became a professional fisherman. The trout in those mountain streams are awfully obliging. My flies were very crude and rough, but they gobbled 'em up like anything. I used to sell what I caught to tourists and campers-out and little hotel-keepers. I got quite rich that summer, rich enough to take the diligence to Pau and buy a frock and look for a more steady job.'

'You found one?'

'Yes — in a shoe shop — one of Pinet's branches. They put "English Spoken" on the window because of me. I stayed there a goodish while, but I hated it rather. I hated being on my knees to people. Besides, feet are rather horrid, aren't they?'

'Oh, Noelle, you gipsy!' I cried.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to call her by her first name.

'Well, I had to do something.'

'And during the war?' I asked.

'Munitions,' she replied, and made a face. 'Munitions are worse than feet — because they are always the same. I must have stuffed millions of cartridges — oh, millions. But we could stand up to it — we didn't have to grovel and of course we had so much money.'

'Even here — in France?'

'Yes, by comparison. I was able to buy books and get some education. My education had been sorely neglected.'

I said, 'I think it was perfect.' And then I said, 'What made you associate the affair in Farthing Hackett with your father?'

'Just a feeling — a tremendous feeling. I have dreams sometimes — even when I'm awake.'

'They seem in the way of coming true,' said I.

Noelle nodded and rose.

'Shall we walk for a bit? It's coldish sitting.'

We came back through the garden and so to the main road. A footpath led away to the left, crossing a rough stone bridge barely a yard high. In its centre was a shrine with an image of the Virgin in a mantle of blue-and-gold stars. Noelle told me it was dedicated to Joan of Arc, who once had stooped to drink from that bridge.

'She, too, had dreams,' I said.

'And look where they led the poor thing,' she replied, and stuck out her under lip.

The road led us across meadows with flashes of water that reflected the pale blue of the sky. Presently it rose in a series of S-bends until at last we came to the solitudes of the Forêt d'Arques. A woodcock whiffed upward through the naked branches and a cock pheasant pattered away over the carpet of fallen leaves.

We rested on a pile of cut faggots and I lit my pipe. Throughout our walk, Noelle had asked no questions. She was the least curious girl I have ever met. She seemed to be blessed with an astonishing gift of detachment. She talked freely, but in little spasms, what she

said being inspired by what was seen or happened as we trudged along.

Not until we had settled down on the heap of brushwood did we return to the subject of her father and what had arisen out of my discovery.

'It is only half a find, Noelle,' I said, and told her that, though I had the formula, the code in which it was written was still a mystery to me.

She was silent for a while, her chin in cupped hands, thinking. At last she said:

'Father never told us that — he wouldn't — he said it wasn't fair. But he did say' — she paused — 'he did say that if anything were to happen to him — before he died he would write it.'

'He died too suddenly to carry out his promise,' I said.

She nodded.

'Then he was killed outright.'

'Hardly that,' I said. 'The position in which I found his body proved that he had crawled a few yards under the shelter of the cliff.'

'Tell me everything — exactly,' she said.

And so, with every vestige of detail, I reconstructed what had happened in Farthing Hackett.

'Is that everything — everything?'

'I think so, Noelle, except that on the rock where his hand lay, I found a flint arrowhead.'

She leapt to her feet, a light of triumph in her eyes.

'Then he kept his promise,' she cried. 'Don't you see? He kept his promise.'

I hammered my knee with a shut fist.

‘What a fool I’ve been — what a fool!’

For, as if it were already proved to be there, I read, under the moss and lichen of that slab of Sussex shale, a scrawl of figures that were destined to shake to their foundations the great oil companies of the world.

4

It was after one o’clock when we returned to the Clos Garnier, and madame, who had prepared a most distinguished *déjeuner*, reproached me with a shake of the head. However, she swiftly relented and, after observing that like all the English I was *un méchant garçon*, she assured me that nothing had been spoilt and vowed that I would find the dishes to my liking. The fare was excellent, but, lacking the inclination to eat by myself, I begged leave to join the table where monsieur, madame, Noelle, the small boy, the concierge, and his wife were seated. This privilege was readily accorded to me and, friendship being swiftly established under the democracy of food, a very merry meal we made of it.

In the gust of laughter that followed a jest of madame’s, a car whisked through the gates and drew up in the gravel courtyard.

The arrival of any car at that season was an event, and Noelle, who was sitting nearest the window, lifted the muslin curtain to see who it might be. The result was surprising, for with a short gasp she let the curtain fall and whispered,

‘It’s Jura — my sister.’

No one but myself was aware of what she had said, for with the arrival of the car, everybody, including

little Toto, had trooped out to welcome the new arrivals.

With a swift injunction to stop where I was and keep my back to the door, Noelle slipped into her seat behind the counter.

The curtain had not fallen quite into place, and over the heads of M. and Mme. Garnier I saw a man and woman. The woman, who was dressed in a fashionable leather motoring-coat, was tall and angular. She carried her head in what I can best describe as a complaining sort of way. The glimpse I had was of the briefest, for once her foot touched the ground, she was eclipsed by M. Garnier. I had more time to study the features of her companion, since he stood up in the car to rid himself of a leather motorist's helmet and a huge overcoat of goatskin. Beneath this rough exterior was a person of sartorial perfection, with a sleek head of hair and a small black moustache cut high from a pair of very red, curved lips. The thick coatings of mud which covered the body of the car suggested that they had travelled a great distance at high speed. On the rear seats was a quantity of luggage.

He alighted from the car, rubbing his hands together to restore the circulation.

To Mme. Garnier's enquiry I heard the querulous reply:

'Yes, *déjeuner*, by all means. But there is a young woman in your employment I wish to see. No, no, leave the luggage.'

The room darkened for a moment as they entered through the open doorway. Faithful to instructions, I did not look round.

Then the woman exclaimed, 'Noelle, so you are here!'

Noelle made no reply, but I could imagine her just looking.

As a meeting of sisters who had been parted for over a decade, it was scarcely cordial.

Madame had gone to the stove and was busy cracking eggs for an omelette. M. Garnier and the rest drifted back to their interrupted repast.

'We only heard yesterday.'

'Heard what?' said Noelle steadily.

'Do you mean to say you don't know? Mario saw it in an English paper, and we came at once, from Saint-Jean de Luz. This is Noelle, Mario.'

'Charmed, delighted,' said he. I heard him kiss her hand and murmur, 'Delicious.'

'If an omelette to be followed by a ragout would satisfy ——' Madame began.

'Yes, yes, anything!' Jura cut in. Then to Noelle, 'Do these people understand English?'

'No,' said Noelle.

'That man?' — and I felt myself pointed at.

'A guest of the house,' said Noelle.

'Let us sit at this table, then.'

'I have my job to do.'

'You little fool — something a good deal bigger than your job is looming up.' She turned and addressed madame in French. 'May this girl sit at our table? — we are acquainted.'

'But certainly,' was the sullen rejoinder.

The new arrivals had not made a favourable impression. M. Garnier caught my eye, and, pursing his lips,

was guilty of an unconventional sound commonly employed to indicate disparagement.

5

The table at which they had disposed themselves was too far removed from where I sat for more than an occasional fragment of their talk to be audible. In the few short hours of my acquaintance with Noelle I had assumed a proprietorial interest in her affairs. By a pure accident we had become involved in a big adventure, and I resented exclusion from any part of it.

Confronting me was a mirror across whose surface in scarlet lettering was strung the magic name 'Dubonnet.' It reflected the table where Noelle, Jura, and her husband were sitting. Jura's back was toward me and a very well-dressed back, too. I felt, however, a strong dislike for the woman and a conviction that hers was a plain and sterile mind, operating along grooves of incorrigible slyness. Noelle was at the head of the table — a static figure in profile. The background was marred by a three-quarters view of Mario — smiling and revealing a set of teeth so white and uniform as to suggest the handicraft displayed in a dentist's showcase rather than the work of nature. His looks were of a sleek, Mediterranean beauty, which, in the cinema world, produces disquieting effects upon the susceptibilities of ladies. His hair was raven black with a smooth ripple across it. His face was without a line and of a pale olive colouring, merging into grey about his chin. He gave me the impression that he shaved at least three times a day and would excel at the tango. Upon the first finger of his left hand he wore a ring

with a huge and suspicious ruby in it. I thought him a very nasty fellow indeed.

It was Jura who did most of the talking. She spoke in a low voice and very rapidly.

Noelle scarcely spoke, but once I heard her ask, 'What made you think it was Father?'

'The pocketbook and the two photographs.'

'I see.'

Jura leaned back in her chair.

'What has happened is as clear as day. This fellow Shaftoe went through everything and handed over to the police what he had no use for.'

'Of course — of course,' laughed Mario. 'Damned scoundrel.' He leant across the table and spoke in a jarring foreign accent.

'My dear Noelle, you are very young. This dear clumsy fellow has put himself wrong with the law. In a civilized country one is not allowed to rob the dead. The average Englishman does not fear many things, but of a policeman he is afraid.'

'I see — blackmail,' said Noelle. 'How simple!' Then, 'All we have to do is to threaten him and he will hand over everything to us.'

'Once we have the formula, Mario will make terms with one of the big oil companies,' said Jura.

'Mario will?' Noelle repeated. 'But suppose I do not wish Mario to interfere in my affairs?'

'What do you know about business? Mario is as clever as a monkey. He will get a huge sum from them and we will share it between the three of us.'

'So he's to have a third share,' said Noelle. 'Why?'

'He'll earn it, won't he?'

'Not if I can prevent it,' said Noelle, with sudden fire. 'Father believed his discovery was going to help the whole world, and I mean to see if he was right. You want to tear it up for a bit of money — to stuff your pockets by wiping out what Father gave up his life to discover. Well, I'm on his side and you shan't do it.'

A long silence followed this outburst, during which a glance was flashed between Mario and his wife. Leaning forward he shut his hand over her wrist and closed the fingers tight.

'Little lady, be careful — be so careful,' he said, and although he smiled an evil light glittered in his eyes. 'Do not forget, you are alone in a foreign country. When a big machine moves down the road wise children stand aside to avoid being crushed.'

I think I was justified, but I certainly didn't stop to ask myself. M. and Mme. Garnier and the rest had left the kitchen and apart from ourselves there was no one to be shocked. Crossing the room in half a dozen strides, I clapped a hand over Mario's face and heaved him onto the floor, chair and all. It is curious how small details obtrude themselves in moments like that. I remember that his face was smooth as a woman's, and felt beastly. I remember, too, that the ring on his left hand struck the tiled floor and the ruby, so called, broke into fragments of powdered glass.

I fancy he must have imagined himself the victim of highway robbery, for, as he struggled to his feet, his right hand fumbled in his hip pocket. Unhappily the pocket was buttoned and he had no small difficulty in getting out the pistol. His greatest admirer could not have claimed that Mario Gualia was quick on the

draw. A more laborious business I never witnessed. It may have been a sharp 'Mario, no!' from his wife, or it may have been that I offered no further show of violence that persuaded him to abandon the project of shooting me. He let his hand, with the fist clenched, fall to his side, and made quite an alarming face at me.

'By God, monsieur, you shall answer for that!' said he, in French.

'When you like and how you like,' I replied, in English. Then, drawing up a chair to the table, I added, 'But, until I do and after I have, please avoid leaving your finger-prints on Miss Noelle's wrist.'

'Who is this man?' he cried excitedly.

I answered the question and suggested that, if he proposed to frighten me, now was the time.

The announcement of my identity had a bewildering effect upon the pair of them.

'But how — why?' Jura began.

'That is easily explained,' I replied. 'By pure chance I came into possession of some property to which I am entitled only by right of salvage.'

'You admit that?' she cried excitedly.

'I have been admitting it verbally and tacitly for some days past and to a variety of persons,' I said.

'You are aware,' said Jura, 'that you stand in danger of being arrested for robbing my father's body?'

'A small sin,' said I, 'which I have in part expiated by seeking out his daughter with the object of giving her what I found.'

That made them sit up.

'You have done that — you have given it to Noelle?'

I shook my head. 'The legacy being of some value,

I felt justified in assuring myself of her identity before doing so. If Miss Noelle wishes you to act as her agent, I shall be happy to resign my interest. In self-protection, however, I shall advertise in the newspapers to whom I have handed over the formula, as I have no wish to remain a target after the reason for it has disappeared.' At this observation Mario quailed obviously. I went on: 'The question is, Does Noelle desire your services in this matter or does she not?'

'No,' said Noelle, 'I don't.'

'Well, there you are,' said I. 'It seems that she likes you no better than I do — which isn't much.'

Mario Gualia looked at his wife with an expression that seemed to say, 'What next?' My threat to advertise in the papers had alarmed him exceedingly. Jura, however, was made of tougher stuff. Leaning across the table, she rested a hand on Noelle's arm.

'How can you be so mad as to risk our fortune with a stranger?' she said. 'He has had the grace to make this offer — accept it while you have the chance.'

'No,' said Noelle. 'I appoint Robert Shaftoe and no one else to look after my interests.'

This was more than the two could stand. Mario Gualia brought his hands down flat upon the table. In doing so he saw for the first time that his ruby was no longer in its setting, but lay powdered on the floor.

'Doors of hell! My fetish! It is smashed!' he cried. 'All hope of this adventure succeeding is lost.'

His concern was genuine — the reasonless concern of a superstitious man. I felt almost sorry for him.

'As a gem,' said I, 'it was of small value and doubtless can be replaced at any bicycle shop. It would have

become you better and have been seen to more advantage attached to the back of your coat and worn as a tail light.'

There is no doubt that I was behaving badly. I am, as a rule, an easy-going individual, slow to take or to give offence, but Mario Gualia acted upon me as a match on gunpowder. I have met many worse men than he, but none I hated more swiftly or intensely. I couldn't bear the fellow at any price. To tell the truth, I liked his wife but little better, she being of that hard and acquisitive type that is seldom popular among men. At my first glance I had put them down as a pair of Continental adventurers, and what had taken place did not persuade me to alter my opinion. I thanked my lucky stars that I had joined forces with Noelle before they appeared on the scene.

Jura rose to her feet and beckoned to Mario to do likewise.

'We have lost our tempers and are behaving like children,' she said. 'If we are to profit by this discovery, it will not be by quarrelling among ourselves. Come, Mario, let us walk in the garden and return in half an hour.'

Taking his arm, she led him out.

6

When the door closed behind them, I sought Noelle's eyes, and found them brimming with laughter in suspense.

'Aren't you jolly, Bob?' she said. 'Jolly, cheeky, and gay. I wonder what I should have done without you?'

'Or I without you?' I replied. 'Do you really want me to handle this business?'

'Of course I do, but on one condition: that we go evens. Jura must have her share, I suppose, but the rest we'll divide.'

I started to protest, but she shook her head to silence me.

'I mean it, Bob. It's either that or I'll ask you to drop the whole thing.'

She made me shake hands on it. After that we discussed our plans.

'Somehow,' I said, 'we shall have to test the stuff and prove whether your father's claims are justified.'

'They are,' she said. 'I know. He made it once — gave a — what's the word — demonstration at Oleron. There were four men present — big-money men. Oh, it worked all right. It was after that the trouble began.'

'The stuff must be patented,' I said. 'Once it is patented, we can breathe freely. It's a pity those two turned up. How did they know where to find you?'

'I send Jura a card once a year to the Poste Restante at Toulon.'

'That husband of hers is a nasty piece of work.'

'They are horrid — both of them — horrid and bad.'

I pulled the lobe of my ear thoughtfully.

'I wonder if we could give them the slip and get back to England on the night boat? Have you a passport?'

'Yes; I was in England for a holiday last summer.'

'There's a boat at midnight,' I said, 'and I've a car in a garage at Newhaven. We ought to be home by breakfast time.'

Our talk was interrupted by the arrival of Jura and Mario.

Jura approached Noelle with outstretched hands and a set speech about forgetting the past and being friends. It would have deceived no one, but Noelle had the wit to give it an amiable reception.

'We have been talking things over and have agreed that your friend has a claim to a share with us,' she said; 'even Mario has agreed to that. We feel that in England his help may be of value.'

'Capital,' said I. 'We enter the same boat and I take command. We were discussing our return to England as you came in. I am afraid it will have to be delayed for a few days until Noelle can get a passport.'

Jura suggested that we might return straightaway and leave Noelle to follow, but this I would not countenance. It was thereupon decided to take rooms at the hotel for a couple of nights, until the passport was available. The *annexe* at the end of the garden was opened and our rooms prepared.

The afternoon passed in an atmosphere of forced *bonhomie* which was very painful to maintain. Mario paid a flying visit to Dieppe to make application for the passport and returned with the news that it would be available by six o'clock the following afternoon. During this absence I had a confidential talk with Mme. Garnier, and if a trifle of money passed between us it should not be taken to argue that her favours and her friendship were for sale. It was arranged between us that the concierge should be waiting at 11 P.M. in a small barn by the railway crossing with the hotel car,

an ancient Renault with a wagonette body. It was further arranged that he should empty the tank of Mario Gualia's car to a bare half-pint of petrol.

'Enough,' I said, 'to leave him high and dry a couple of miles from the village.'

Romance and chivalry being dear to the heart of every daughter of France, madame entered into the arrangements with enthusiasm.

The room allotted to me in the *annexe* was on the first floor and immediately adjoined two apartments set aside for the Gualias. I found myself separated from Mario by the thickness of a plaster wall and a locked door with a cracked panel. Fortunately the crack was on a slant and afforded my neighbour no opportunity of taking a peek at me. While we were tidying for dinner, I could distinctly hear every movement he made, and even the sound of a sigh.

Dinner, which we four consumed in each other's company, was a very dreary affair. The cooking was excellent, and, since there was nothing else to do, we lingered at the table until ten o'clock. Noelle was first to leave. She nodded a general good-night and retired to her room overhead. Her departure seemed to increase the awkwardness of the Gualias.

'She has grown into a very beautiful girl,' said Jura, 'very beautiful. I can easily understand how she won your allegiance.'

I said nothing, and she rose with a yawn.

'To bed. With all there is before us we must rest while we can.'

Mario and I lingered over our brandy.

'That was a lucky find for you,' he said, and added:

'*Bon Dieu!* I should think so. What sort of price do you imagine they will offer us? A million?'

'We are not taking a price,' I answered. 'We are going to put a new substance on the market and sell it.'

'Talk sense,' said he. 'In matters of finance I have made one big discovery. Take a price and get out.'

'Got the funks already?' I asked, pushing back my chair.

'I've got some brains in my head.'

'Very likely you'll get a bullet in it before many days pass,' said I and rose. 'By the way can you lend me a pair of pyjamas? I didn't bring any with me.'

'You are without luggage?'

'That's it. All I have of value is in my pockets.'

Pushing open the kitchen door, I walked out into the night. It must have been a terrible temptation to him to have had a plug at me then and there, but his nerve wasn't equal to it. After hovering in the open doorway, he joined me on the gravel path and we walked to the *annexe* and mounted the stairs side by side.

I left the door of my room ajar and presently he came in with a pair of pyjamas of unusual design. I thanked him and wished him good-night. He lingered for a moment indecisively, the while, I suspect, he made a mental inventory of the furnishing arrangements. Suspecting that he was in all probability contemplating a return visit at a later hour, I casually remarked that I hoped he didn't snore, since I was a light sleeper and was disturbed by the least noise. At this he started uncomfortably and, with a muttered good-night, retired. It was not until he had gone that I realised, with some admiration, that the doorkey had

gone with him. I did not undress, but I stumped about the room long enough to give the effect that I was doing so. Through the communicating door I could hear him similarly employed. I judge we must have got into bed at about the same time.

At half-past eleven, I lowered myself from the little balcony to the limit of my arms and, dropping softly upon a flower bed, dusted down the garden path in my stockinged feet.

Noelle was waiting for me in the pavilion by the main road and darted out in answer to my call. I grabbed her hand and we beat it for the car like a couple of kids melting out of an orchard.

The concierge must have heard our hasty approach, for the engine was running and the car was actually pulling out of the barn as we reached it.

Mario Gualia must have been more alert than I thought, for he was not more than twenty yards behind us when we tumbled aboard. He wasted no time in pursuit, but, facing about, raced back to the hotel as fast as he had come.

'Oh, what fun! Heavenly fun!' Noelle gasped.

'It will be fun so long as he hasn't enough petrol to catch us up,' I replied.

I was beginning to think we should have acted more wisely to spike his tyres. Of course I had expected a bit more start and had wanted to get him marooned on an empty road between the village and Dieppe, where he would have no chance to use the telephone. The Renault, considering its great antiquity, was making good progress, but Mario's car was one of those speed-devouring monsters that could have given us six

miles in ten and eaten us up. Mario at the wheel of such a machine was a much more formidable antagonist than Mario with his feet on a carpet. In the mood which our flight had inflamed in him, I had a sure conviction that he would not hesitate to side-swipe our little outfit off the road and down the embankment.

The five miles to Dieppe, after the curve by the railway crossing, is as straight as a billiard cue, and we had covered nearly half the distance when the glare of his headlights swept round the bend and found a flickering reflection in Noelle's eyes.

'He's coming,' she said. 'Oh, the wretched little man!'

He certainly was coming and coming fast. Every instant I was expecting those leaping lights to come to a standstill, but they did not.

'Did you empty the tank?' I demanded of the concierge, who nodded an affirmative.

'There was no reserve tank?'

'Non, monsieur.'

'Then all I can say,' said I, 'is that the petrol consumption of that car is much too low.'

A couple of minutes later the car came roaring up into our dust cloud. I thought it was all up with us, but, as Mario was swinging out to come alongside, with a spit and a splutter his engine petered out.

He was not more than three yards away when this happened and above the drone of our exhaust I heard the exclamation of savage rage he uttered. Dropping a hand, he threw out the gear and coasted along in neutral. I suppose his miserable little pistol must have been in the seat beside him, for I saw light flash along

its nickel barrel as his hand came round under the spot-light and he fired.

'Oh!' exclaimed Noelle, and started to suck the little finger of her right hand.

Mario's car fell behind. He jumped out and threw up the bonnet.

'Are you hit?' I asked.

'Just a scratch on the little finger. It's nothing — look.'

As a wound it was, as she said, nothing but a mere flick, but it was more than enough.

'Stop!' I shouted to the concierge, and dropped to the road.

Mario Gualia was still half buried under the bonnet of his car when my hand dropped on his shoulder. That he had not heard my approach is due to the fact that I was still in my socks. His look of amazement was comic, but very brief. I hit him only once, after which his expression became entirely blank. Picking him up, I heaved him into the car and left him sprawling on the front seat.

'What an angry sort of man you are!' said Noelle, when I rejoined her in the Renault. 'Did you kill him?'

'I suppose not,' I said; 'p'r'aps it's a pity I didn't.'

A little after midnight we watched the lights of Dieppe fade like star dust into the sea.

7

It must have been about five o'clock in the morning when, after a deal of knocking and shouting, I succeeded in rousing from his sleep the proprietor of a

small Newhaven garage where I had left Dominic's car.

'It comes to this,' he grumbled, fitting a key into the private lock-up I had hired: 'Decent people what are decent people stop on board until seven o'clock. Some of you ain't got no manners and no consideration. When this 'ere strike comes along, likely you'll learn some'ing about some'ing.'

At this windy complaint Noelle showed a disposition to laugh, which I rebuked with a stern eyebrow.

I asked him if any one had enquired after me in my absence.

'No, they haven't,' was the sour retort, 'and why the hell should they?'

'It is the curse of popularity to be enquired after,' I assured him.

'Then you ain't likely to be troubled,' said he.

I gave him ten bob as a comforter and we drove away as day was breaking.

A humid mist slowed our progress over the downs, but melted away as we dipped into Brighton.

At Shoreham we had tea and eggs at a sweet-stuff shop and watched the sun rise over the oil reservoirs in the harbour. Its early rays peeping into the room made a fringe of gold round Noelle's head.

I said, 'You look like a saint,' and made a clumsy grab for her hand. Her second egg rolled off the plate and hit the floor with a wet pop. So I decanted half my second egg into the empty shell of her first. Somehow that seemed an intimate thing to do and after we had eaten it — which we did in silence — I felt as if I knew her ever so much better.

While I was paying the bill, Noelle rose and stared out of the window.

'Those great tanks,' she said — and pointed — 'where does the oil come from to fill them?'

'Mexico, Persia, Rumania, Iraq — all over the world, Noelle.'

'All over the world,' she repeated, 'and in every part of the world men working.' She shivered and buttoned up her cape. 'Let's get on, shall we?'

We ran on through Steyning, Storrington, Pulborough, and a mile or two short of Petworth we turned southerly.

'Nearly home,' I said.

The mighty shoulders of Duncton Hill, Bignor, and Bury Hill heaved themselves up before us.

'It lies under the big motherly downs,' I said.

'Motherly — what a good word!' she nodded.

The road dipped and twisted, was swallowed up in a string of brown copses and popped out into a sweep of undulating common land.

'There,' I said, and pointed.

Smoke from the chimneys of Xavier was rising in pale blue spirals above the avenue of elms, but between the farm and ourselves were other drifts of smoke, their source hidden by a fold in the landscape. We switchbacked up onto a small crest from which the road declined gently toward the farm. Here we were greeted by a surprising sight. The usually deserted common was dotted all over with gipsy encampments. At one spot two caravans were parked one on either side of the road and, what with the dogs and straying horses, we were driven to slow down to a snail's pace to

pass them. While doing so I remarked a very curious fact. The camps were peopled exclusively by men. Of women and children there was not a sign. Nor was this all. Attached to the top of one of the caravans and supported by a wooden prop at its far end was a long washing-line to which various articles of apparel were attached. You will say, 'Why not?' and I will agree that even gipsies sometimes indulge in a washing-day, but they do not as a rule employ copper wire for their line and they do not as a rule attach its extremities to china insulators.

'If that isn't a wireless set, another hat will be eaten,' I whispered. I felt Noelle thrill against my side.

A tall, military-looking figure lounged across the road before the car ostensibly to drive away a wandering pony. Something in his profile was very familiar to me.

'All clear,' he said, looked at my face, and dropped his jaw in amazement. 'I'm damned!' I heard him mutter, an imprecation which, I believe, is much too refined to be used by Romany folk.

I waited for no more, but stepped on the gas and covered the last quarter of a mile at speed.

'He recognised you,' said Noelle.

'And I, him,' I said. 'But where?'

Suddenly it came to me. The man with the rough coat and the scarf about his neck was the hall porter from the headquarters of the World United Oil Company in Kingsway.

It was evident that Oscar Kahnet did not intend to leave anything to chance.

Except at night the front door of Xavier was left permanently on the latch, and I was surprised to find that it resisted my efforts to turn the handle and to note that the lower windows were shuttered. I took a lug at the bell and waited. Presently a voice — my father's — boomed from the other side of the oak.

'Who is it? Who's there?'

'Friends to this ground and liegemen to the Dane,' I answered stoutly.

'Damme, it's Bob!' I heard him cry, and with a great clatter of bolts and jingling of chains the door was thrown open. The old man's great body with hands extended filled the entrance. His arms fell to his side at the sight of Noelle.

'Bless my soul!' he roared, 'if he hasn't flushed the gel too! Come on in; I'd have known you anywhere by your eyes.'

'Do get out of the way and let me have a look,' said Anne, who was bobbing about behind him.

But the old man was in his most possessive mood and, throwing an arm round Noelle's neck and mine, he dragged us into the house, leaving Anne to lock up.

'Well, this is fine — grand!' he said. 'After thirty-six hours behind shutters, your face, my dear, is as good as a plunge in the sea.'

And without so much as a by your leave he took Noelle's face in his two rough hands and gave her a whacking great kiss. Woman's instinct is swift and sure, and Noelle did not betray the least resentment at this attention, but returned it with no less enthusiasm than it had been offered.

In my father's mind a time of rejoicing was inseparably connected with something to eat, and, although he had finished his breakfast an hour before, he started to bawl for victuals at the top of his voice. The shindy was so great that it attracted Dominic from a distant part of the house. Clattering downstairs, he burst into the room with a knuckle duster in either hand and an expression of the keenest ferocity upon his face.

'Miséricorde,' he lamented on seeing me; 'I really thought we were in for a scrap at last; but it's only you and ——' seeing Noelle, he drew himself up, with a bow. 'Forgive me, Princess, I didn't know ——'

'This is Noelle Wilbur, Dom,' I said. 'Noelle, my friend, Dominic Vane.'

Noelle gave him one of her sudden smiles and held out a hand.

'Just one moment while I take off my gloves,' said he, and, dropping the knuckle dusters in his pocket, he stooped and kissed her hand very prettily.

'What sort of time have you been having here?' I asked.

'That's all we have had — time,' he replied. 'We've just listened to the clocks inventing it.'

'You seem to be standing siege.'

'We are. You told me not to show myself, and I haven't — at least, not much.'

'How do you mean?'

'There was a man waiting by the garage when he arrived the day before yesterday,' Anne chipped in.

'That's right,' Dominic nodded; 'a nasty fellow with a torch. I think he wanted to make sure that I — or rather you — had come home safely.'

'Did he see you?'

'Not very much,' said Dominic. 'Though he may have seen the hand of fate travelling swiftly toward the point. Oh, boy, that was a daisy of a sonk — a perfect peacherino. He slipped along on his ear for half a mile.'

'Bob gave some one a sonk last night,' said Noelle. Bless her! I don't think she wanted me to feel out-classed. She added, 'A very good sonk, too.'

'Good work,' said Dominic.

'Anything else happen?' I asked.

'Plenty,' my father replied. 'The whole neighbourhood is flooded with gipsies. They are skulking round the place day and night. I packed off the servants on a holiday, as it made 'em nervous.'

'I rather fancy they are a welfare brigade,' said I, and told how I had recognised the porter. 'They seem to have got a wireless transmitter among other things. They were quite surprised to see me coming in rather than going out of the farm.'

'Do you know,' said Anne excitedly, 'our telephone has been cut — at least, not exactly cut — but what's the word?'

'Interrupted,' said Dominic. 'Yes, they've fitted up a little branch exchange on the common and one can put a call through only by courtesy.'

'It's true,' said Anne. 'I have to give the number to some awful person who decides whether I shall have the call or not. Of course, if one were to try and get in touch with the police or any one, you wouldn't be let.'

'And this in England,' said Dominic, one hand on his heart, and the other held aloft. 'My England.'

'Well, now you're back, Bob, I shall throw the place open and carry on as usual,' the old man declared.

'Have you been cooped up, too?' I asked.

'Have I? Blazes! It 'ud take more than a troop of knockabout scarecrows to keep me off my fields. Yes, indeed, I've gone around with this in my pocket.' He hauled out a greasy catapult and a few pebbles. 'And any one who came too near for my liking got a smack wherever it might be that taught him to keep a proper distance.' He nodded his head in a very resolute fashion and strained the elastic to the full. 'I haven't forgotten how to use it, either,' he added.

For a company of human beings practically cut off from the civilised world, they seemed very cheerful about it.

'Haven't the local police taken an interest in these gipsies?' I asked.

My father looked uncomfortable. It appeared that Rogers, the constable, had called to make enquiries about the fired rick. 'I told him it had probably been started by a spark. Well, it may have been.'

'You didn't mention our visitor?'

'He didn't ask. Rogers called again yesterday afternoon to warn us of the gipsies. — As if we didn't know!'

'Did you make any complaint?'

He coloured angrily, because anything in the nature of concealment was hateful to him.

'How could I? You put yourself on the wrong side of the law when you started this business. Very well, then, you can't ask the law to help when you get into a mess. If we aren't honest, let's be fair.' He sniffed

and fumbled for a pipe. 'Come on, boys, down with the shutters.'

'Hang on a minute,' I said. 'Let's keep 'em up until to-morrow morning. To-night I want to give the impression that I'm indoors when in reality I'm out.' Then in answer to their puzzled faces, 'With any luck I shall find the key to the code before dawn to-morrow.'

9

The afternoon was uneventful. My father went about his business as usual. Dominic and I played shove-halfpenny and between us smoked a quarter of a pound of tobacco. Noelle took Anne to the kitchen and showed her how to make a *galette*.

At five o'clock we were startled by a double knock at the front door. Going into the hall, I found a letter lying on the mat. I expressed surprise that the normal postal services were allowed to penetrate the cordon which surrounded the house, but Dominic shook his head.

'To interfere with a postman in the exercise of his duty is a bit too risky, even for that bunch,' said he. 'Private intimidation is one thing, but they won't want to bring down upon their heads the wrath of the Government.'

The letter was addressed to me. I broke the seal and read:

Confidential.

SAVOY HOTEL, LONDON

Commander Robert Shaftoe, R.N.

DEAR SIR,

From newspaper reports and enquiries I have reason to believe that the body found by you in a wood near the downs

was not, as stated, the body of a German aviator, but of a certain Mr. Michael Wilbur, who, prior to his death, had perfected a petroleum substitute which he had classified as MW-XX.3. Mr. Wilbur was a personal acquaintance of mine, and, indeed, I was one of four men privileged to be present at a demonstration of his synthetic spirit at the town of Oleron in the south of France. The success of this demonstration was, I venture to suggest, the primary cause of Mr. Wilbur's death. Representatives of one or two of the larger oil groups were present, and they, with a view to safeguarding their interests, were prepared to pay any sum in reason to persuade the inventor to make no use of MW-XX.3. I, however, was of a different mind, and was actually forming a syndicate to exploit the substance when news came of Wilbur's death and the loss of the formula. A nucleus of that syndicate is at present in London, and would be glad of an opportunity to make your acquaintance and certain proposals. I should add that, although we had no contract with Mr. Wilbur, he was entirely in sympathy with our projects and anxious to avail himself of our financial support and resources.

You may be surprised that this letter should be addressed to you and you may ask on what grounds we have assumed that the body you found was Michael Wilbur's. This is a question I shall be happy to answer if you will be so good as to grant me an interview at your earliest convenience.

Yours very truly

MISCHA GROFFE

P.S. I read in yesterday's paper that you have entered into an agreement with the World United Oil Company, but from information received from private sources I am disposed to question the accuracy of the statement.

For your information, sir, I feel I should warn you in an affair of this magnitude whose ramifications reach to the farthest corners of the world, that you may find yourself exposed to certain personal hazards. You would be well advised to secure your safety by accepting the friendship and

support of a group of financiers and men of standing such as I have the honour to represent.

Only Noelle and Dominic were present when I opened the letter and I read it.

'Mischa Groffe. He was the man I spoke to you about. I remember him distinctly,' said Noelle. 'A little man with a body like a mosquito and a great big head. You know, all top to his head and rather a skull-like face under it. He *was* at Oleron.'

'Can you remember what your father thought of him?'

'You never knew with Father — he was so passionless about people; but I never heard him say anything against Mr. Groffe. The rest, he said, were dreadful.'

'I've heard of him, of course,' Dominic cut in. 'A pretty lively reputation in financial circles. Substitutes are his particular hobby. He put over a leather substitute in '21, and two years later a marble substitute that made pots of money and then went phut because the stuff didn't last. Groffe is all right, I believe, but he's supposed to be an Armenian and they're a queer lot. Still, I dare say he'd be as good as any one you're likely to find.'

'One thing is certain,' I said, 'without a syndicate of some kind we won't last a day.'

'I suppose that's true,' said Noelle. 'I suppose we can't handle it ourselves.'

'What? you and Bob start a laboratory on the Great West Road, and sell penn'orths to passing motorists? Hardly. Why, every oil float that went by would sling a spanner through the window.'

Noelle did not smile. She was possessed by a sudden gravity.

'I hate that part,' she said. 'I hate the idea of men losing their jobs because of us. Father used to say one could carry as much of it in a match-box as would run a car all day. He said you could fill a gasometer with half a hundredweight. He said it would revolutionise the fuel supplies of the world.'

Something in the way Noelle said that checked even Dominic's irresistible gaiety. A sort of gloom settled upon me. Tea, which followed shortly afterwards, was rather a sombre meal.

It was about nine o'clock when Dominic and I played the overture to our nocturnal adventure.

At the back of the house was a cellar which ran some distance under the garden to a small grating much encumbered with weeds and rubbish. I fancy it may have been used in the old smuggling days for the purpose of lowering kegs of brandy into the cellar without disturbing the respectable members of the household. In the reign of George III many Sussex farmers ran a sideshow in contraband.

The grating was secured on the inside by a padlock, so rusted and crusted by time that we had to break it open with a steel poker.

Our unobtrusive exit thus established, Dominic and I walked boldly out of the front door into the arms of three men, who were doing sentry go in the drive. Although clad in the roughest of clothes, their manner of address was courteous in the extreme. Torches were flashed in our eyes, which made it impossible to see their faces, but I thought I recognised my friend the

hall porter by his height and military bearing. A fourth man stepped out of the bushes and addressed us with anxious concern.

'May I ask, gentlemen, where you are going?'

'That,' said Dominic, 'is our business, but if you'd like me to suggest somewhere for you to go, I shall be charmed.'

'I am afraid,' said the anxious individual, 'I shall be obliged to ask you to return to the house.'

'I am going to drive to London straightaway,' said I.

'You are not,' said he. 'We've made one mistake already, Commander, and I shall be careful we do not make another.'

'Look here,' I blustered, 'you can't keep us prisoners, you know.'

'There is no question of that,' said he. 'You are being protected as even royalty is not protected.'

'Why?' I asked.

'I haven't the least idea,' he replied. 'I only know that you may not and shall not leave this house until I have orders to let you.'

'Aren't you afraid of getting into trouble?' Dominic demanded.

'I am, indeed,' was the answer, 'but I am even more afraid of losing my job. Now get back indoors, like two good fellows.'

'And if we refuse?' I said.

'We shall carry you in.'

Dominic started to protest, but, plucking his sleeve, I made some pretence of whispering in his ear.

'Good,' he said, and nodded. 'I entirely agree. We'll go back and fetch 'em.'

I was turning when I felt a touch on my sleeve.

'Fetch what?'

'Never you mind,' said Dominic, 'but they tell me a dose of number sixes at anything under fifty yards is a very painful experience.'

Returning to the house, we slammed the front door, raced down the cellar steps and were out by the grating window and snaking through the raspberry bushes before the watchers in the drive had returned to their posts.

A dark, cloudy sky and a low hedge favoured our flight and we reached the downs without opposition. Our object was to approach Farthing Hackett from above. After a wriggle up the open hillside for a hundred yards, a patch of gorse afforded excellent cover to the top of the Hackett. In the darkness and viewed from above, the place was cheerless and ghostly. We did not, however, waste time indulging in eerie fancies. We had brought with us a cord of stout rope and, making one end fast to the bole of a gorse bush, than which there is no tougher anchorage, we lowered ourselves into the dark pit hand over hand. The air below was as still and clammy as the grave and the darkness so intense that only by feel was I aware that Dominic was beside me.

A single flash gave us our position and revealed the spot where Michael Wilbur's body had lain. The surrounding ground had been heavily trampled by the morbid sight-seers whose sinister curiosity had brought them to the scene. Even the slab of shale upon which the dead man's hand had rested was scored by the nails of a boot.

'Take off your coat and make a screen,' I whispered. 'It won't do for those beggars on the common to see a light.'

The time that followed was one of the most anxious in my life. As I gently scraped away the moss and lichen which coated the shale, all manner of doubts and uncertainties assailed me. It was useless to pretend I could remember the precise spot where Michael Wilbur's hand had rested and I had picked up the arrowhead; I had therefore to scrape and scrutinise every inch of the surface. For a quarter of an hour I worked without finding a sign of what we were seeking and had almost given up in despair when Dominic pointed at a faint scratch under the blade of my knife.

'You're right,' I said, and with trembling hands rubbed the surface with a handkerchief until it almost shone.

Michael Wilbur was a dying man, indeed, when with the last of his will power he had compelled his hand to score those numbers. With a match stick I removed the final deposits from the scratches and read, '1-9-1-2.'

'Nothing else?' from Dominic.

We scraped all round the spot, but there was nothing more.

'Nineteen twelve. You're satisfied?' I asked.

He looked long and earnestly.

'Yes — there's no mistaking it.'

'Then here goes,' said I, and with a lump of flint, cracked and smashed the record into an ugly scar.

From near by came the sound of feet running and

swishing branches. A voice cried, 'Who's there? Who's in there?'

We did not wait to answer, but with a final blow from the flint, which cracked the shale like a sheet of glass, we made a dart for the rope.

We must have put a healthy strain on that rope, for we swarmed up one under the other. Below us a light flashed and a voice swore at the whipping branches.

We regained the hillside, pulled up the rope, and returned to the farm by the borstall.

I shall never forget the amazement of the watchers when we sailed up to the front door and rang the bell.

The fellow in charge nearly swooned.

'I thought we told you we were going out,' said Dominic. 'Come in and have a drink if you're feeling poorly.'

10

The visit we paid to Farthing Hackett was not the only excursion I made that night. In the very small hours I passed through the grating a second time and wormed my way to the old tithe barn. I returned a few minutes later with the copy of the formula tucked inside one of my socks.

Pixie must have got wind of me, for she set up a terrific barking from her kennel, which resulted in unseen men racing round to the other side of the house to investigate the cause. In the confusion I vanished discreetly through the grating.

I have often thought that this second jaunt was the maddest part of the whole enterprise, inasmuch as it invited the capture not only of myself, but of the

precious document upon which all our hopes were built.

Noelle, a candle in her hand, was waiting by the cellar door to greet me.

'All right?' she whispered.

I nodded and took her arm, and we climbed the steps together.

The others were in the dining-room — three rather strained faces lit by a single lamp.

'Got it?' my father asked, and when I assented he filled a glass of beer and swallowed it at a single draught. 'Well, what next?'

In the silence before any one answered, the sound of the telephone came faintly to our ears.

It was two o'clock in the morning, and a call at that hour was rare enough to be startling. Anne half rose, but I waved her back and left the room to answer it.

'Hullo? Yes,' I said.

A very clear voice replied,

'Hold the line for Mr. Kahnet, please.'

There was a click, followed by the characteristic drone of a long-distance call. Then:

'Am I speaking to Commander Shaftoe?'

There was no mistaking Oscar Kahnet's birdlike voice.

'You are.'

'I have no apologies for the lateness of the hour, Shaftoe, since you were not asleep.'

'How do you know that?' I replied.

'Because either you have decoded or you are about to decode Michael Wilbur's formula.'

My gasp of surprise must have been audible to him.

'There is no great divination in that statement. I was informed that an hour ago you and your friend visited the place where the body was found. The object of your visit was clearly expressed by the mutilation of a certain rock upon which, without doubt, the keyword to the puzzle had been graved.'

'And if it were?' I said.

'If it were,' he replied, 'it is a logical inference that you will waste no time in informing yourself of the exact wording of the formula.'

'One might suppose so,' I admitted.

For a moment there was silence. I thought we had been cut off — then:

'Don't be tiresome, Shaftoe,' he said, 'and above all, don't be selfish.'

'Selfish!' I repeated. 'You feel that I should share the information with you.'

'On the contrary, I beg you to share it with no one. There are in your house two women and two other men besides yourself. I do not doubt that you have every reason to trust them implicitly. It would be too much to ask you to forget the keyword and destroy the formula — your understanding will not have reached that plane of self-sacrifice — but it should not be too much to ask — I had almost said to implore you not to expose others to a danger comparable to your own.'

There was something so sincere in his voice that for a moment I was half deceived by it.

'I see your point,' I began — but he cut me short.

'You don't, Shaftoe. You see what you take to be a trick designed to confine the knowledge to an irreduc-

ible minimum, a trick whereby, if you were successfully put out of the way, the danger would be removed.'

'You must admit it looks like that,' I replied.

'Does it? Very likely.' His tone was almost sad. 'But I can only assure you there is no such thought in my mind. I have had some experience of secrets — business secrets — official secrets; but I have hardly ever known of a secret that was well and truly kept. We are too ready to trust. You have taken upon yourself to break a lance against a mountain. At least you will have the courage to ride alone.'

There was a click — the faint buzz of repeated numbers on an exchange — a fragment of distant talk — 'Doctor — is that you, doctor?' — then the clear voice that had first addressed me:

'Mr. Kahnet has finished speaking. I'm cutting you off now.'

The line went dead.

Hanging up the receiver, I went slowly down the stairs.

'Who was it?' asked Anne breathlessly.

To the best of my ability I repeated all that had been said.

'How queer!' said Noelle, when I had finished. 'How queer! I wonder what he meant by your understanding not having reached that plane of self-sacrifice.'

'An elaborate and rather effective bluff,' Dominic suggested.

Noelle shook her head. 'He was right,' she said. 'It would be almost cowardly to tell.'

'Don't bother about that, my dear,' said my father gently; 'we can take care of ourselves.'

'Rather tough on old Bob to be the only target,' said Dominic.

'But he wouldn't be. I must know, of course,' said Noelle swiftly.

I looked at her. She was very small and frail to carry information of that size in her head. The thought of what might happen to her appalled me.

'If you, then your sister too,' I said. 'She's a half owner, Noelle.'

'Yes, that's true,' she said, and bit her forefinger. Presently she raised her eyes and fastened them on mine.

'Bob, I want you to be the only one. Read it — learn it and destroy it — just you.'

'That's a tremendous risk, too,' I said, 'but if you trust me well enough to take it ——'

'I do,' and she gave me her hand.

'Very well, Noelle.'

And while behind the locked door of my room I decoded Michael Wilbur's formula, my father did sentry-go in the hall below and Dominic Vane sat at the head of the stairs, a twelve-bore gun loaded in both barrels lying across his knees.

II

There are few men with less knowledge of practical chemistry than myself. At school I had taken the ordinary course of 'stinks,' of which I could remember scarcely anything. With such a slender equipment to draw upon, I was surprised at my ability to understand the formula after I had decoded it. It is, of course, impossible to state in this narrative the chemical com-

pounds employed, but one and all were of a kind to be obtained from any ordinary pharmacy. In the matter of preparation there were no technical difficulties whatever. The whole business seemed about as easy as stirring up flour and raisins in a bowl. The united ingredients formed, the writer explained, a greyish powder which he defined as MW-XX.3. A footnote read:

This powder is entirely safe to handle and will not respond to any analytical tests. It does not develop gaseous or explosive properties until mixed with water.

Used as a substitute for motor spirit the properties were one half of an ounce to two gallons of water (undistilled). By an adjustment of quantities a cruder, less volatile fuel could be obtained suitable for Diesel types of engine.

For two hours I pored over the document until I had saturated my memory with every detail of it. It was six o'clock in the morning when I burnt the copy and pile of notes and jottings I had made. It will be remembered that I had concealed the original formula under Victoria's millstone in the back garden, but, with the exception of the vague hint I had dropped to my father, no one was aware of the fact. So far as I was concerned, I could trust my memory to the extent of knowing that I should have no future need of it. I knew that I could not forget. The formula MW-XX.3 was as solidly fixed in my mind as the knowledge of my own name.

When, at last, I rose and unlocked the door, my limbs felt stiff and my skin parchmenty. Dominic was

still at his post, the gun upon his knees. He smiled a greeting as I came out.

'All to the good?' he asked.

When I nodded, he rose and stretched himself.

"Break we our watch up," said he.

My father was prowling about the ground floor with an ash plant. 'I shall turn in for half an hour,' said he, in answer to my nod that all was well.

It was like him to ask no questions. I drifted into the dining-room, where Noelle was curled up in a big armchair before what was left of the fire. I thought she was asleep and, tiptoeing across the room, went down on my knees beside her. One small hand hung over the arm of the chair, palm outward, and very lightly I brushed it with my lips. The hand woke up and trailed over my face.

'What a tired face,' she said.

The hand, soft and cool, passed over my head and came to rest at the back of my neck.

Rather awkwardly I touched my forehead and stammered, 'It's here, Noelle — all here.'

'A safe place for anything,' she answered.

'I know a safer,' I said; 'where I keep you, Noelle,' and I put a hand over my heart.

A smile twinkled at me, and she said: 'I'm glad. Go and get some rest.'

'I couldn't sleep with all that's buzzing round. My head is opening and shutting.'

'I shall lock it up for the night,' she said, and, leaning toward me, she rested her cool lips on my forehead.

BOOK III

I

ABOUT ten o'clock that morning I called up the individual who controlled our telephone from the common and asked leave to speak to Oscar Kahnet. He was kind enough to say I could do so, and a few minutes later informed me that Mr. Kahnet was on the line.

A birdlike voice enquired what I wanted. I replied that I proposed to carry out an experiment requiring various chemicals, and would be much obliged if he would procure them for me.

'Is this in the nature of a joke?' he asked.

I assured him that it was a perfectly serious undertaking. His next question was slow in coming.

'And what are the chemicals you need?'

I told him they were numerous and suggested that he make a list at my dictation.

'Willingly — eagerly,' he replied, 'but is it wise on the telephone?'

'My way it's safe enough,' said I, and enumerated a list of requirements a yard long.

'I see,' he said. 'Yes — yes — rather witty, really.'

'I dare say I shan't want quite so many for the experiment, but it is nice to have plenty of everything when setting up a laboratory,' said I.

He took no notice of that, but read over the list meticulously.

'One of my men shall procure them at once from

Chichester,' he said. 'You may expect to receive them before luncheon. By the way, I had a visit from Jura Gualia and her husband this morning. Tiresome, unattractive people. You were wise to give them the slip. The woman is mischievous — the man is a typical hysteric. Take my advice and avoid them.'

'I will,' I promised.

It was after two when a car was driven up to the front door. Three men alighted and deposited a crate on the step. I myself admitted them and, feeling a little above myself, I asked them to be so good as to carry the crate down to the cellar where the experiment was to be made. This they consented to do, and were further prevailed upon to wheel round an old motor cycle from the shed and carry it downstairs too.

Their curiosity was, I suppose, pardonable, for, having done all that was asked of them, they betrayed no inclination to depart, but lingered in the cellar examining its modest architectural pretensions with marked interest.

'I would invite you to stay, gentlemen,' said I, 'but I feel I have trespassed upon your time too much already.'

'Which translated, boys,' said Dominic, 'means hop it.'

Anne and Noelle both helped in the work of unpacking the crate, and soon an impressive array of bottles was lined up on a kitchen table which I had put there for the purpose.

Some kind of prescience must have been responsible for my first action when I was left alone. Each one of those fifty bottles contained exactly measured quan-

tities of chemical substances and of that number less than ten were required in the formula. It was clearly evident, then, that if I used only the chemicals actually needed for the manufacture of MW-XX.3 the untouched bottles would betray the secret. To avoid this risk, I opened every bottle and emptied odd quantities from each into an old tin.

Then with a pair of scales and an easy conscience I got to work.

To tell the truth, I felt rather an ass messing about with a science of which I knew nothing. If Michael Wilbur's petroleum substitute were any good, it was a positive scandal that its manufacture should be left to the hands of an ignorant amateur.

But notwithstanding these modest reflections I weighed and mixed and stirred with patient determination and presently achieved a greyish waxy powder which clung to the sides of the pudding basin I was using, like damp flour.

When the time came to immerse the stuff in water, I was obsessed with a presentiment that the whole thing was a gigantic hoax, but no sooner had the powder touched the water than the liveliest reactions occurred. The whole surface was animated by a sudden activity; it seemed to crawl. A sharp, sour smell arose that caught at the throat and made the eyes smart. For a few seconds the fluid became dense and creamy with effervescing bubbles, but after a while these bubbles cleared, leaving a fluid that was as sleek and limpid as London gin.

Tentatively, I dipped a finger, but before I had raised it level with my eyes it was bone dry. Ether

would not have evaporated more swiftly. In all I had made less than half a gallon, and this I decanted into the empty tank of the motor cycle. What was left of the powder in the pudding basin I collected and put into an empty aspirin bottle, which I tucked into my waistcoat pocket.

The motor cycle had been perched on its stand with the back wheel clear of the ground. Getting into the saddle, I bent down and flooded the carburetor. Then, with my heart in my mouth, I put a foot on the starter and kicked. Nothing happened. I kicked again, but still nothing happened. I kicked a third time, and with a sharp sneeze the engine began to turn.

In that hollow, low-pitched cellar the row was appalling, so appalling that it was some time before I heard the banging on the door that announced the arrival of Noelle, Anne, Dominic, and my father. Jumping from the saddle, I threw open the door.

The sight of a motor cycle roaring away on a stand is not perhaps impressive, but from the expression on their faces as they beheld it one might have supposed they were in the presence of a work of art the like of which had never before been seen. Amazement giving place to enthusiasm, Dominic lifted a mighty yell and, seizing Anne in his arms, waltzed her round and round the palpitating machine. Noelle moved to my side and slipped a hand into one of mine. Her silence was more expressive of awe than any words. My father gave expression to his feelings by thumping me on the back as though I had swallowed a bone.

At that moment above the roar of the motor cycle I heard a crash — a thud, and men's voices shouting.

'Hullo, what's that?' my father cried. But the words were barely spoken when the door was flung back and a dozen men with handkerchiefs tied over the lower halves of their faces and revolvers in their hands burst into the cellar. Their leader, a thick-set man with rough, hairy hands, stuck the muzzle of an automatic into my stomach.

'Back against that wall the whole lot of you — women too.'

We were taken so utterly by surprise that resistance was out of the question.

They say there is a virtue in knowing when one is beaten, but it is a virtue that has no partnership with pride. I knew, of course, that we had nothing to lose by obeying this order, but that knowledge was not shared by the others, and I shall never forget the look in their eyes when I was the first to hold up my hands. Dominic, who would gladly have died fighting for even the most trivial cause, threw back his head in disgust. I heard my father repeat, 'Bob, Bob,' in a tone throbbing with reproach. I lacked the courage to look at Noelle. Anne, her fists pressed tightly to her mouth, stamped a foot repeatedly on the ground.

'Pack all those chemicals,' the leader ordered, 'every one of them, and if a single bottle is broken, I'll take the skin off the man's back that breaks it.'

With surprising rapidity the table was stripped of everything and the crate filled.

'Upstairs and into the van.'

While the crate was borne up the cellar stairs, the leader and two other men covered us from the doorway.

‘Now, you, in single file up to the hall.’

With hands above our heads like a troop of African porters, we mounted to the hall.

The front door, torn from its hinges, lay flat on the floor. The aperture beyond was entirely blocked by the back of a lorry. A long scaffold pole projected through the tail board into the hall. The pole and lorry had evidently been backed into the front door as a battering-ram. Straddled on a couple of sacks inside the lorry were two men wearing the kind of masks you buy at a sweet-stuff shop. Mounted on a tripod between the knees of each man was a machine gun, one pointing into the house and the other down the drive, where a group of our gipsy friends were standing with hands above their heads. We had barely fifteen seconds to take in the scene, for no sooner was the crate aboard than the leader and an escort jumped in after it.

Some one shouted, ‘All set!’

The machine-gunner alongside the driver splashed off a ribbon of shots that scattered the gipsies like chickens as, with a grinding of gears and the roar of an open exhaust, the lorry started down the drive.

At the right-angled bend by the gate she took a dry skid and then, squaring up on the crown of the road, vanished into the dip beyond.

My father was the first to speak.

‘Life is a wonderful thing,’ he said, ‘but sometimes one buys it too cheap.’

‘I thought you were a fighter!’ said Anne. ‘Oh, oh!’ and began to cry.

‘I wonder,’ said Noelle slowly — ‘I wonder if we are

being fair. I wonder if they will learn anything from those bottles.'

'Not much,' said I. 'Thank you for trusting me, Noelle.'

'But look here,' growled Dominic, 'you've blown the whole works. They've only got to weigh up what's left in the bottles to know exactly how the stuff is made.'

'I foresaw that risk before I got to work,' I said, 'so I emptied some out of each bottle by way of a safeguard.'

Never in my life have I seen four faces so transfigured.

'A bluff,' my father roared, and landed me a blow that knocked half the wind out of my body. 'A bluff, and like a blind old fool I thought you were funkng.'

As for Dominic he could only squirm about like a man with a colic, and repeat, 'Oh, hot! oh, very hot and juicy!'

2

The agitation displayed by our friends the gipsies was pathetic. Their spokesman — he who had addressed us the night before — could find no words to express his horror and contrition at what had taken place. By the light of day I recognised him as Mr. Cole, the assistant manager.

'Our orders were to protect you and we have failed utterly. But what is a man to do in the face of machine guns?'

'He lies down if he wants to get up again,' said Dominic.

'I don't know what will be said about this at headquarters,' he wailed. 'Of course the explanation is obvious — there was a traitor among us. I know who he is — one of the men who went to Chichester for those drugs. He was missing immediately afterwards, and turned up again in time to help carry the motor cycle down to the cellar. After that he disappeared — and must have joined that gang in the lorry.'

'Where was the lorry?' I asked.

'Apparently broken down beyond the entrance to the farm. It seemed an ordinary builder's lorry — there was no reason to suspect — After all, the roads *are* free — one can't hold up *all* the traffic.'

'No, no,' said I. 'Considering your difficulties, Mr. Cole, I think you've done uncommonly well.'

'It's nice of you to say so, Commander Shaftoe — very nice. I'm sure we've done our best, but this' — and he waved his hands in despair — 'this is terrible.'

I told him to be of stout heart, that things were not so bad as they seemed. But my words were wasted — he was inconsolable.

It was Dominic who asked him if he had any idea why he was doing all he was doing.

Mr. Cole shook his head.

'I have an idea,' he admitted, 'but no exact information. Very few men enjoy Mr. Kahnet's confidence.'

'Then who were those fellows in the lorry?'

'God knows — a set of murderous ruffians. If I may use your telephone, I'll inform headquarters straight-away.'

That was too much for my father's patience. He

had had as many uninvited guests as he could endure for one day.

'I understand your feelings, Mr. Shaftoe,' said Cole pathetically. 'Please believe I am only too anxious to show you every consideration but ——'

'The only thing you need show me is your back,' my father retorted, 'and I won't be standing on more than one leg while I'm looking at it.'

Under the persuasion of this tacit threat, Mr. Cole retreated with more haste than grace.

While Dominic and I were patching up the front door Anne came out and joined us.

'I suppose you noticed him among those men who held us up in the cellar,' she asked.

'Noticed whom?'

'Our pink-eyed friend — Mr. Warrinder — the man who fired the hayrick.'

I looked up in astonishment.

'No? Are you sure, Anne?'

She nodded.

'I knew him at once — the colour of his hair and those pointed ears.'

The reappearance of Mr. Warrinder was significant. Evidently the mysterious company by whom he was employed were no longer deceived by the paragraph Oscar Kahnet had published in the papers. The number of our enemies was increasing day by day.

We had a council of war that night, in the course of which I had an urgent plea from Oscar Kahnet to come to Town immediately.

It was the first time I had detected nerves in his voice.

'While you remain in such a lonely place I cannot guarantee the financial security of my company,' he said, with charming impersonality.

I told him that we had intended coming to Town in any case and presumed that his concern was on account of what had happened that afternoon.

'Yes, yes, in some measure; although, since I have already proved that you are no fool, I have little fear of the consequences of that very ill-judged raid.'

I agreed that the raiders were likely to be disappointed. Perhaps there was a touch of bravura in my voice as I said it, which he was swift to correct.

'When men are disappointed, we have most to fear from them,' said he. 'A victory of that kind may be bought too dear. The sooner you are in Town the better I shall be pleased. Good-night.'

Oscar Kahnet had an exasperating habit of saying the last word on the telephone. I invariably found myself cut off with something good unsaid.

I do not think we slept too well that night. The excitement of the last few days had made us jumpy. For my own part I sat up in bed smoking pipe after pipe, staring at the ceiling and listening to the crunch, crunch of men's feet on the gravel outside. Even my father looked nervy when early next morning we met downstairs for prayers and breakfast. The least concerned of all was Noelle. She and Anne had risen an hour before the rest of us to light the fires and cook the breakfast. Her face betrayed neither alarm nor excitement, but in her eyes was a grave expression I had not seen before.

That scarcely a word was spoken during the meal

was not strange. I have already said that my father was an advocate of silence at table. But the silence that morning was of a different nature. It had about it something ominous.

By courtesy of our protectors a newspaper had been thrust through the letter-box, which my father propped against a pot of damson cheese and read as he ate. From a glimpse I had of the headlines, the chances of the coal strike being averted seemed remote. We were rising from the table when he gave a soft exclamation and, pointing at a certain paragraph, handed the paper to Noelle. Aloud Noelle read:

Madame Mario Gualia, daughter of the late Michael Wilbur, warns all and sundry that attempts may be made by her sister, Noelle Wilbur, or by Commander Robert Shaftoe (R.N.) to put on the market a petrol substitute, the invention of their late father.

As Madame Gualia and her sister are equal beneficiaries under their father's will, no contract will be binding without Madame Gualia's sanction and signature.

A more effective means of robbing our enterprise of the last vestige of its privacy could scarcely have been devised. In her endeavour to protect her own interests, which had never been at stake, Jura Gualia had increased the dangers which surrounded us beyond reckoning.

With that announcement in *The Times* we could safely assume that within a few hours we should be the chief subject of interest to every oil company in the world. Of course, it might be argued that in the majority of cases little notice would be taken of the affair, but coming as it did *after* Oscar Kahnet's publication

of the terms of the contract offered to me, this was a slender hope. Huge financial concerns have their own secret services, and it was unreasonable to suppose, with my name appearing in both paragraphs, that they would dismiss the affair lightly from their minds. Besides, there was sure to be a record of Michael Wilbur's pretensions to which they would refer. On the face of it Jura Gualia had put us in the way of a peck of new trouble.

'If you ask me,' said Dominic, 'I'd suggest getting in touch with Mischa Groffe as fast as possible. This affair looks as if it were getting out of hand.'

That was true enough, but not so easy of accomplishment as it sounded.

'If we go up to Town we go under escort and that escort is going to stick to us like a leech,' I replied.

'They'll stick on the open road, no doubt,' said he, 'but once we get into heavy traffic they won't find the job so simple. With a good man at the wheel something might be done. Once inside the Savoy Hotel, they can hardly haul us out by the scruff.'

I looked at Noelle and she nodded.

That settled it as far as I was concerned.

'I'll get out my car straightaway.'

'With no disrespect for the aged, why not mine? An extra spot of speed might make all the difference.'

On our way to the garage we met Mr. Cole. He had abandoned his disreputable disguise and was wearing his city clothes. He asked if we were going to Town and was greatly relieved when I answered yes.

'I hoped so. Everything is ready. A car will be at the door in a moment.'

'Thanks,' said I, 'but we are using one of our own.'

'As you wish,' said he. 'It is quite immaterial. We will pick you up at the foot of the drive.' So saying, he trotted off to make final arrangements.

My father and Anne came to the garage to see us off. Anne's face was a picture of misery, which seemed to be largely directed at Dominic. In the last few days they had become great friends.

'I hate, hate, hate being left out of it,' she said, kissed Noelle, stamped her foot, gave Dominic a sort of punch, and, ducking her head, dived into the house.

Dominic took the wheel and Noelle and I scrummed into the back seat.

'Good-bye, Father,' I said. 'Good-bye, you old Briton.'

3

Mr. Cole did not mean to let himself be taken by surprise a second time. The arrangements he made to ensure our safe-conduct were embarrassing in their thoroughness.

Emerging from the farm gates, we found ourselves in a forest of motor cars and motor cycles. The roadway resembled the meeting-place for a hill trial or endurance test.

Mr. Cole personally supervised this impressive pageant. The order of procedure was two motor cycles, one car, ourselves with a motor cycle on either side of us, then two more cars, and a rear guard of two motor cycles.

But for the fact that we had proof of the nature of

our adversaries, these elaborate precautions would have been comic.

Mr. Cole, who rode in the car behind us, gave the signal to start and away we went like race-horses when the flag drops.

The leading motor cyclists set a brisk pace and we tore across the stretch of downside road, where a few days before I had been fired on, in Brooklands style. I imagine this part of our route was regarded as the most perilous, for I noted a long line of men strung out across the downs with the evident intention of discouraging any recurrence of my previous adventure.

Our speed sobered down when we reached the main road. Until then Noelle and I had scarcely exchanged a word. Under the rug she slipped a hand into mine and laced her fingers tightly.

I cannot tell why, but the sudden intensity of the action expressed an unspoken doubt.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘I was wondering,’ she answered — ‘wondering if we are right about all this.’

‘Why should you wonder that?’ I replied reassuringly. ‘Your father gave his life to perfect this discovery. Why should you be uneasy to profit by it?’

‘Well, I wondered if we were on the right track, Bob — if, in spite of ourselves, we were not going to do harm. It may have been what that man Kahnet said put the idea into my head — I mean about not having reached that plane of self-sacrifice. It seems to have been such a good thing for a man like that to have said. I’d give anything if he hadn’t said it.’

‘Oscar Kahnet is a very clever man, Noelle.’

'And very wicked, too,' said she; 'but that didn't sound clever or wicked, it sounded — sincere.'

'It probably was from his point of view,' said I. 'Your father's invention attacks the whole foundation of his business.'

'I suppose so — and heaps of others like it — and thousands of men's jobs. That's what I hate to think about.'

'But, Noelle,' said I, 'at present we have committed ourselves to nothing — but a very glorious adventure.'

'Ah,' she nodded, and smiled, 'don't think I'm not loving that part of it. These last three days together are the best in the whole of my life — that's why I don't want them spoiled by anything ugly.'

The road we had taken led through Godalming and thence over the hills to Leatherhead. In both these little towns the newsvendors' shops were gaudy with posters threatening a general strike. Among them I read: 'WORKERS' THREAT TO HOLD UP NATION.' 'ONLY A MIRACLE CAN AVERT STOPPAGE.' 'GOVERNMENT READY.' 'LAST HOUR HOPES.'

'What is it all about?' Noelle asked.

I have no pretensions as a politician, but to the best of my ability I explained what had brought about the crisis.

'Wasn't there a general strike not so long ago, and didn't it fail?' she asked.

I nodded. 'In a week — yes. The men of this country learnt to be useful and handy during the war. They picked up the dropped tools and worked 'em.'

'I see.' She paused — then 'Oh, dear, the country is coming to an end.'

'Not on your life!' I replied stoutly.

'Not England, but the hills and fields and trees,' she laughed.

It was true. On either side houses and buildings were crowding in upon us as we sped Londonwards. The tenacity of our escort was remarkable, for they continued to maintain formation even in the busier thoroughfares. At Hammersmith Broadway a traffic-control policeman, who innocently attempted to divide our ranks, had to leap to an island to avoid the cars and cycles which swept along in our wake. He shouted lustily and blew a blast upon his whistle, but, as there was a clear road ahead, we did not stop to argue.

I had not discussed with Dominic the project of shaking off our faithful attendants. Success in that direction depended upon luck and opportunity and it was safe to assume that Dominic would take advantage of any chance that arose. I cannot pretend that I entertained much hope of success and I decided that he had made up his mind not to make the attempt when, after slanting out of Trafalgar Square, we found ourselves in the Strand. A stream of traffic was pouring continuously in both directions and the Strand was the last place in the world to afford opportunities for a get-away.

It must have been the knowledge that this would be an opinion common to all that persuaded Dominic to make the attempt. Opposite the Adelphi, where the street is narrowest, he swerved outward in such a

fashion that the motor cyclist on our off side had to drop back to avoid a collision with a bus that was coming towards us.

'Ease over a bit, old man!' he shouted.

But apparently Dominic did not hear. For the next hundred and fifty yards he skimmed the mud-guards of the west-bound traffic in a way that earned some enthusiastic obloquy.

We were directly in front of the Savoy Hotel when he performed the sensational feat. Without warning he switched across under the bonnet of a taxi-cab, dived between the back of a brewers' dray and the front of an omnibus, and was inside the Savoy Hotel quadrangle before you could say knife.

Apart from its spectacular elements, the manœuvre was a triumph of ingenuity, since it left the whole of our escort on the far side of the road without a dog's chance of getting into touch with us.

What they did I have no idea, as we didn't stop to find out. The car had barely stopped before the three of us were through the Savoy doors and into the foyer of the hotel.

The suddenness of our arrival would have excited some comment had not Dominic and I been fairly well known to the staff.

Dominic, who had assumed command, thrust us into an elevator, saying, 'Top Floor,' to the boy in charge, but, before we had reached that altitude, he changed the order to 'Mr. Mischa Groffe's apartment.'

'Have you an appointment with the gentleman, sir?' the boy enquired.

'Yes, for the last two days,' Dominic replied.

'By rights, sir, I should have instructions from the reception bureau.' And in some dubiety he stopped the lift between two floors.

'Now, come along, my lad,' said Dominic, 'and if you get into trouble you have only to say that the Earl of Hammersmith and the Duke of Gunnersbury were responsible.'

At the mention of these resounding titles the boy's confidence revived, but I believe it was Noelle's 'It's quite all right' that finally persuaded him to take a chance.

He stopped on the second floor and indicated double doors at the end of the passage.

'That's Mr. Groffe's.'

Our knock upon the double doors was answered by a man in a black suit who bore the unmistakable stamp of a confidential servant. He looked us up and down in a way that indicated that we were neither expected nor approved.

'Mr. Mischa Groffe,' said I.

'Mr. Groffe is engaged and can see no one,' said he.

He was in the act of closing the door when I put my foot in it.

'Tell him Robert Shaftoe wishes to see him at once,' said I.

With the mention of my name his manner underwent a complete change. 'I beg your pardon, sir, come in, please. I have orders to admit you at any hour of the day or night.'

So saying, he opened a door to a larger room beyond where a number of men were gathered about a table.

Standing by the window, looking out over the river, was a woman — her back toward us.

‘Commander Shaftoe and a lady and gentleman,’ the servant announced.

The woman by the window turned with a sharp intake of breath.

It was Jura Gualia.

4

So much that was unexpected had happened during the past few days that I had lost the habit of being surprised.

Jura’s advertisement in *The Times* was sufficient explanation and excuse for Groffe to have got into touch with her.

Two of the men at the table rose, the one Mario Gualia, and the other a stranger who, with protestations of enthusiasm, introduced himself to us as Mischa Groffe.

There could be no doubt that Mischa Groffe was a personality. There was about him a spurious suggestion of youth, belied by an intricacy of minute lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes. His hair, bronze in colour, was as luxuriant as a weed and was worn in the now extinct fashion which the French used to call ‘*coupé en brosse*.’ His face was clean-shaven, but his eyes, smudged into their sockets by a finger dipped in brown, were screened by bushy brows of a lighter red than his hair. A great breadth of forehead overwhelmed features which were small and insignificant. As Noelle had said, there was something suggestive of a mosquito in this thin, wiry body. His hands were

large, with stubby and very restless fingers. Even when he extended a hand for me to shake, the fingers were in continual motion as though urging me to lose no time over the formality. As a general rule a man bears the unmistakable stamp of his nationality in his appearance, but with Groffe this was not so. Beyond saying he was un-English in type, I was at a loss to hazard what country he hailed from. Nor, when he spoke, did his voice betray his origin. A slight Southern American drawl drifted across a guttural *r* and became confused with Oxford English as it is spoken without *g*'s in the hunting counties.

'A great pleasure and a great surprise, indeed,' said he with a Continental bow to Noelle. 'Although you were no higher than that when we last met, I have not forgotten you, Miss Wilbur.' He straightened and looked at Dominic. 'And this gentleman?'

I introduced them and added a word to the effect that our presence was due entirely to Dominic's dexterity.

'At a later time all such friendship shall be rewarded,' said Groffe.

I saw at once that the remark was no success with Dominic. He scarcely looked at the hand that was offered to him. Brushing it with his own, he turned aside with 'Throw me a rose and I'll be satisfied.'

Mischa Groffe sniffed reprovngly, and forced a smile.

'It is more than good fortune you should have chosen this moment to arrive,' said he, 'since apart from Mrs. Gualia and her amiable husband, these gentlemen' — he indicated the five men at the table —

'form the nucleus of that syndicate about which I wrote to you. We were gathered together to consider ways and means of rescuing you from your — shall I say, enforced seclusion at Xavier Farm.'

He held out a hand and the five gentlemen rose, one by one, and approached.

Having looked forward to a more or less all-British company to support our enterprise, their combined appearance had a depressing effect upon me which a recital of their names did little to ameliorate.

'Mr. Kurd Icante, Mr. Biederhoff, Mr. Frambauer, Mr. Alix Ioneth, and Mr. Roberto Tringolore.'

In age this amiable quintette were distributed between the forty-fives and the sixties. With one exception they were much of a height and cast. The exception was Roberto Tringolore, who was so small that he looked as if he were sitting down when he was standing up. They shared in common massive heads disproportionate to the size of their bodies.

Accustomed as I was to the neat, rather small heads of the average service men, the spectacle of these five great domes struck me at once as grotesque and ominous.

'With M. Mario Gualia you are already acquainted,' said Groffe.

'When I have done with him, he will be even better acquainted,' said Mario Gualia, and snapped his fingers insolently in the air.

'That's a nasty bruise on your chin, my dear fellow,' said I. 'How did you come by it?'

He was about to answer when Mischa Groffe held up his hands.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' he besought. 'The situation in which we find ourselves is of such gravity and importance that it would be tragic to allow a shadow of animosity to fall between. The arrival here of Commander Shaftoe and of Miss Wilbur should be sufficient evidence that the fears you entertained about their loyalty are groundless.'

The five gentlemen with foreign names had reseated themselves at the table and were shaking their big heads at one another. They were, I fear, not a little shocked at the intrusion of personal grievances in an affair of business.

'I can see no point in this man remaining here,' I said. 'Apart from being Mme. Gualia's husband he has nothing whatever to do with this affair. His wife owns a half share in the invention; she has a right to stay.'

A still, small voice emerging from Roberto Tringolore observed, 'Alla of this is most improp'.'

For the first time since our arrival Jura spoke.

'Since my husband is asked to retire,' said she, 'I think Mr. Shaftoe should retire, too. He also has nothing to do with the affair, which is between my sister, myself, and these gentlemen.'

On the face of it the argument was unassailable.

'If he goes, we go together,' said Noelle.

'Then let's all remain,' Mischa Groffe suggested.

But Noelle shook her head and pointed at Mario.

'All but him,' she said. And added, 'You had better agree, for without us you can do nothing.'

With a despairing gesture Mischa Groffe joined the five big heads at the table and a whispered consultation ensued. After a moment he rose.

'With regret, M. Gualia, I fear I must ask you to wait in the anteroom.'

I think it was in the hope of a fight that Dominic took Mario's arm and led him forth.

'Nicer in here now,' he said, as he strolled back from the closed door.

This sentiment found a general reflection. Every one breathed more freely in Mario's absence.

'Put yourselves at the table, please, and let us come to business,' Groffe invited.

5

I must take off my hat to Mischa Groffe for the way he outlined his proposals and sketched out a scheme for exploiting Michael Wilbur's invention.

With the increase of motor traction and the use of internal combustion engines all over the world, the range of our activities, he pointed out, would be enormous.

'But this,' he explained, 'need cause us no anxiety or apprehension, for the organisation which I planned just before your father's death, Miss Wilbur, is susceptible of unlimited expansion.'

He displayed before us a number of letters from Michael Wilbur, containing advice and suggestions as to the production of MW-XX.3.

'You will see from these that I had your father's complete confidence. His estimates as to the cost of production are, of course, susceptible to criticism, but the cost would be fractional compared with the lowest price at which natural gush oils could be sold.'

Then followed a rattle of statistics.

'In transportation alone the advantages of MW-XX.3 are incalculable,' said he. 'The smallest cabin on a passenger liner would be capable of carrying, in dry form, a potential equivalent to the largest oil tanker afloat.'

Accepting the statement of Michael Wilbur that the chemicals required in the preparation of his synthetic petroleum were obtainable in all countries, the necessity for export and import would not arise.

'Wherever motor traction exists,' said he, 'we should erect our plants.'

Apart from the actual details of the formula, it was evident, from the knowledge of the subject he displayed, that Michael Wilbur had concealed very little from him.

In dwelling upon the small cubic area MW-XX.3 occupied before saturation, he gave his imagination free rein.

'Think of it! A man could drive across the continent of Africa with no more of the stuff than would fill a hatbox.'

His restless fingers drumming upon the table, he pushed back his chair and became inspired.

'The exploitation of this discovery,' said he, 'will revolutionise the economics of the civilised world. With MW-XX.3 patented simultaneously in all countries, we shall become a financial force that the combined productions of nature and efforts of man will be powerless to resist. I foresee, within the narrow margin of a single year, that the great oil fields of America, Europe, Asia, and Africa will have become practically desert places.'

I looked at Noelle and saw that her hands were gripping tightly the arm-rests of her chair. Her lower lip, caught between her teeth, was bitten white.

There was something threatening about the calm regularity of her breathing. Her eyes were fixed on Mischa Groffe's face and never deserted it for an instant. I expected a protest to come from her — but there was none. She sat like a figure of Justice listening with conscience rather than with ears.

The difference between the two sisters was never more marked than at that moment. Infected by Groffe's excitement, Jura was leaning forward in her chair, chin on hand, and an elbow on her crossed knees. With her free hand she put into and withdrew a cigarette from her mouth with the regularity of a piston. Her puffing reminded me of the exhaust from one of those little stationary engines to be seen in a wood yard. The timing was identical. I never saw a woman's eyes glitter as hers glittered during that recital. A hard, steely light danced in them.

I turned to look at the five big-headed gentlemen, but, despite the excitement of the moment, and Heaven knows it was exciting enough, not one of them had altered his expression by so much as a gleam of interest. For sheer impassivity they might have taught a lesson to the Sphinx.

From technical, Mischa Groffe became personal.

'The news of your unhappy father's death and the consequent loss, as I believed, of the formula, was the greatest blow I have ever sustained, but, by virtue of the fact that his body was not recovered, I did not entirely abandon hope. Justification of that hope is

proved by your presence here to-day and by the faith and trust, an echo of Michael Wilbur's faith and trust, which you, his daughters, are about to invest in me.'

He paused, as if expecting an endorsement, but, getting none, continued in another direction.

'Let us now investigate what proportion of the profits of our syndicate should be yours.'

For the first time the silent quintette showed symptoms of being alive. The gentleman whose name was Kurd Icante nodded, while Mr. Frambauer, in a rich Teutonic accent observed, 'Ja, Ja! we haf hat alretty too mouch of hypotheses. Gif us now some figures.'

Mischa Groffe protested that it was impossible to presage what amount of capital would be required for the exploitation of the substance.

'Inasmuch as we can look for the liveliest opposition from practically every quarter, the sum will be considerable, but nevertheless I hope it will be possible to subscribe the full amount from our own resources.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that the general public will not be invited to subscribe.'

'I hope not — I imagine not,' was the reply. 'Although later on it may be found necessary to offer an issue of deferred stock in open market.'

'I don't understand these things,' said Noelle. 'Does it mean that, apart from ourselves, no one gets anything out of it?'

Mischa Groffe favoured her with a happy smile.

'In effect, yes,' he said. 'In dealing with what is a practical certainty, it is obviously to our advantage to reduce the number of participants to as narrow a margin as possible.'

'Go on,' said Noelle.

'The proposal that I am going to make to you is the one I made and which proved acceptable to your father. In return for the formula of MW-XX.3 an honorarium of two hundred thousand pounds will be paid to you and a guarantee of twenty per cent of the entire share issue of the company. In this letter from Michael Wilbur' — and he handed a letter to Noelle — 'you will find an informal acceptance of these terms. The variation in my offer to you and to him is that, whereas I then suggested an honorarium of fifty thousand, I have now raised it to two hundred thousand. My reason for doing so is dictated by the great increase in the use of motor traction since the war.'

Noelle read the letter in silence and handed it to Jura.

Mischa Groffe turned to me.

'I think you will agree,' said he, 'that my proposals are generous.'

'Are they?' I replied. 'Since you admit this enterprise is a certainty, I cannot see that it matters what you pay.'

Mischa Groffe smiled.

'Practically a certainty,' he corrected me; 'but, while we are engaged in the necessary preliminaries of flotation, I and my friends here will be assailed from every quarter.'

'That I can believe,' I assented.

'I do not mean assailed as you have been assailed by violence, but by the more subtle and effective method of attacking our credit. Once it becomes known that we are concerned in this enterprise, the existing oil

companies will unite in a common endeavour to smash us to bits. But that I and the gentlemen present in this room are in the happy position of being able to operate from an available reserve in gold, we should not have a chance to stand up against the opposition that will be directed against us. In those circumstances I think you will agree that the terms are fair. Now' — and he laid his hands flat upon the table — 'in this, as in all such affairs, time is a determining factor. Let us not waste it. Let us complete an agreement here and now while the elements for doing so are present and in order.'

He sank back in his chair and turned his eyes on Noelle, but though it was for her answer he waited, it was Jura who spoke.

'Of course we will settle. We should be mad to refuse. At first I didn't think it would be possible in face of the opposition, but with these gentlemen behind us I see I was wrong, and Noelle was right.' She turned to Noelle. 'You hear that? I admit I was wrong. Oh, for goodness' sake, say something.'

But in spite of this entreaty, Noelle neither moved nor spoke.

'There is perhaps some point upon which you are not satisfied,' said Groffe softly. 'You have but to tell us and it shall be adjusted.'

In the silence that followed, everybody's attention was centred on Noelle. She seemed to be lost to all that was happening or being said. Then suddenly she straightened in her chair and looked at Groffe.

'Why do you want to do all this?' she asked. 'What good is it going to do you?'

‘Good?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, what good? If you have all the gold you spoke of, why do you want more?’ Then, without giving him time to answer, ‘Why have you picked out these particular men to join you? Who are they?’

‘These gentlemen, Miss Wilbur, although you would hardly be expected to know it, are some of the biggest financiers in the world.’

‘Rich men?’

‘Of course, certainly.’

‘Aren’t they satisfied?’ she demanded.

Jura Gualia rose, and, moving to Noelle’s side, shook her arm roughly.

‘You are behaving like a lunatic.’

Noelle brushed her hand from her sleeve.

‘Aren’t they satisfied?’ she repeated. Her eyes swept round the table. ‘They are strangers to me — why should I be asked to share Father’s brains with any one of them? Father used to say the world was to be made richer by his invention and yet already you are making plans to keep the world out of it. Why?’

The gentleman whose name was Biederhoff cleared his throat and answered, ‘In giffing to the world cheap power, we giff sompting beyont price.’

‘It isn’t yours to give,’ said Noelle. ‘You’ — she pointed at Mischa Groffe — ‘have talked on and on about the forces we are to become — the profits we shall make. At whose expense are we going to make them? Who’s going to pay for our gains?’

Over my shoulder Mischa Groffe whispered:

‘She will listen to you. Ask her how she could do better than trust the men her father trusted.’

Noelle herself answered him.

'Father! He was a child where men were concerned. He lived in his laboratory with dreams for companions.'

'And would you prevent his greatest dream from coming true?' was the insidious reply. 'I cannot readily believe that a true daughter of Michael Wilbur would condone his murder by letting it go unavenged.'

'Haven't you said enough for the present?' I began, but was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone bell.

Snapping his fingers, Mischa Groffe moved to a side table upon which the instrument stood.

'I should have given orders that I was not to be disturbed.' Then, picking up the receiver, he demanded sharply, 'Yes, what — who?'

The reply astonished him and he rapped his teeth thoughtfully and looked at Noelle. Then, responding to a sudden impulse, he said, 'Show the gentleman up.'

A minute later the servant tapped on the door and entered.

'Mr. Oscar Kahnet is here, sir.'

'Show him in,' said Mischa Groffe, and, turning to Noelle, added, 'The presence of the man responsible for your father's death may help you to make up your mind.'

6

Like an enormous Daniel, secure in the consciousness of his own ability, Oscar Kahnet entered the lions' den.

'That remark was something less than generous, Groffe,' said he, with a soft, sibilant drawl, 'but since it proves I am not too late to avert a calamity, I do

not resent it.' His eyes wandered over the company with cynical contempt. 'What a refreshing spectacle!' he fluted; 'almost as complete a change from a British atmosphere as a circular tour through Central Europe and the Levant.'

On my previous meetings with Oscar Kahnet, we had been alone, but, while realising that he was no ordinary man, the force of his personality had never been so apparent as at that moment. Apart from his stature, he seemed intellectually to overwhelm every one present.

'When I was told that you were prepared to see me, I feared it was to announce that the formula had been assigned to you. It is pleasant to find I was mistaken.'

The five gentlemen at the table had risen and were directing upon Oscar Kahnet glances at once hostile and supercilious. Turning to Noelle, I saw that her eyes were glittering with a cold light of hatred, of which I had not believed her capable.

Jura Gualia rose from her seat, came forward, and spoke.

'Why has this man been allowed to intrude? We have made up our minds what we intend to do and his presence only delays the final settlement.'

Oscar Kahnet held up his hand protestingly.

'And so,' said he, 'the friends of yesterday become the enemies of to-day.'

'I could never be the friend of my father's murderer,' she retorted, and shot a glance at Noelle to see how this lofty sentiment went with her.

'I applaud that, Mme. Gualia,' he replied, 'although

when you and your husband were discussing with me how much I was prepared to pay for the destruction of the formula no such squeamishness was evident.'

'Jura!' exclaimed Noelle. Then, almost to herself, 'You make me sick.'

From his place at the table Mr. Biederhoff rumbled threateningly.

'S'better Mister Kahnet goes away quick. S'no goot to haf him mit us.'

But Oscar Kahnet showed no disposition to retire. He seemed to have established himself permanently. With a smile, he turned to Jura.

'You speak lightly of a final settlement,' said he, 'without, I venture to prophesy, understanding the significance of that remark. If you, or any of you, were to proceed with the flotation of this company, a final settlement would have but one interpretation.'

Mischa Groffe nodded cynically and drew in his breath between shut teeth.

'Threats,' he said, 'are the cheapest of weapons. To put them into execution is another matter. In the case of Michael Wilbur, you had one man to deal with — but now ——'

His gesture ranged the table suggestively.

'In the case of Michael Wilbur, Groffe, only I and one or two others were aware of the menace to employment his invention constituted. You will enjoy no such obscurity. Poor Wilbur had two heads to fight — you will find yourself opposed by a million hands, the rough, brutal hands of men and women whose livelihood has been robbed from them. I fancy this young lady' — he pointed at Noelle — 'must have had some

prevision of these consequences when she hesitated to accept your proposals.'

Looking for all the world like a bantam cock, Roberto Tringolore strutted across the room and planked himself before Oscar Kahnet.

'Slinga him outa here!' he said.

But Mischa Groffe intervened.

'All in good time, Tringolore. At the moment I am amused to see what a poor loser will do.'

'It will be time to amuse yourself with that when I acknowledge defeat. That time has not yet arrived.'

Taking three steps back to the door, he drew from his pocket a small automatic pistol, which, after a moment of hesitation, he levelled at my head.

'The security of a huge section of humanity depends upon the extinction of one man,' said he — 'the man I am pointing at in this rather unconventional fashion. I have but to touch the trigger and the danger is over. Now, if that man were you, Groffe, or you, or you' — and he tilted his head toward the table — 'I should shoot unhesitatingly, and, even though he is not one of you, I doubt if I am doing my duty in failing to shoot.'

There was a strained silence in the room, broken by a nervous laugh from Mischa Groffe.

'Much good would it do you. Unless you put your bullets through the formula at the same time.'

'I should be doing that,' said Kahnet, 'for the formula no longer exists. He destroyed it yesterday afternoon.'

'Is this true?' Groffe demanded huskily.

'Yes,' said I. 'I did destroy a formula.'

'A precious life, gentlemen,' said Oscar Kahnet.

'The only record of MW-XX.3 is in Robert Shaftoe's head.'

'A precious life,' he repeated; 'is there any one here with the courage to protect it?'

'Yes, you beast!' said Noelle, and placed her body in front of mine.

'My dear,' said Kahnet slowly, 'you aren't tall enough by eighteen inches.'

'For God's sake, put that pistol down!' Mischa Groffe exclaimed excitedly. 'Do you want to be hanged for murder?'

Oscar Kahnet nodded at Noelle.

'We have one willing martyr in this room,' said he; 'are you not prepared to believe there may be two?'

'Look out, Kahnet, for God's sake!' I cried.

Heaven knows what persuaded me to warn him, for there is little doubt that my danger was considerable. Out of the corner of my eye I had seen Dominic's hand fasten on the arm-rests of a chair. In a single sidelong movement he slung it across the room.

Oscar Kahnet side-stepped in time to avoid the bulk of it, but one of the legs struck the pistol from his hand. With a whoop of triumph the five financiers leapt to their feet and dived forward, but I was first to reach the pistol and, grabbing it from the floor, I put myself between Kahnet and his assailants and heaved them back.

Their astonishment was comic and I heard Dominic exclaim in despair, 'Whose side is any one on, I'd like to know!'

Noelle stared at me in sheer dismay. As for Oscar Kahnet, he was laughing with that thin, high note that reminded me of wind bells.

'You are an extraordinary young man, Shaftoe,' said he. 'If you'd learn to make up your mind, you'd be quite exceptional.'

'Take your pistol; I haven't a licence,' said I, and thrust it in his hand.

'Aren't you afraid,' said he, dropping it into his pocket, 'that even now I may decide to shoot you? Duty takes precedence to obligation, Shaftoe.'

'I am not afraid,' I replied. 'You have too much sense to waste two lives. It is true I carry the formula in my head, but I have hidden the original where even a regiment of soldiers would never find it.'

A sigh of relief escaped from Mischa Groffe and his colleagues, and, oddly enough, even Kahnet himself seemed happier for the news.

'Oh, wise young man,' said he; 'but for that precaution you would certainly be dead inside a week.'

'And you would have killed him,' said Noelle softly. Oscar Kahnet shook his head.

'Any one of a million would feel himself a benefactor by doing so.'

Mischa Groffe plucked at my sleeve.

'Don't allow yourself to be intimidated,' he whispered. 'If we were in Mexico, Peru, Venezuela — anywhere where oil is produced — the danger would be real, but in this country — no.'

'Are you so sure — when this country is trembling on the brink of a general strike?'

Noelle looked at me. 'Is he lying, Bob, or is it true? Is this what Father's invention would lead to, even here?'

I did not reply. It wanted a bigger brain than mine

to follow the ramifications of MW-XX.3 over so wide a field.

'Can you doubt it is true, my dear?' said Oscar Kahnet. 'If you do doubt it, sign an agreement with these gentlemen here and now, and let the details of that agreement be published in the same newspapers which announce that the strike has begun.'

'Oh, Bob, Bob, take me away from here — I want to think — take me away.' Noelle's voice was choked by a wretched uncertainty.

I put my arm round her and moved a step forward.

'Come back!' cried Groffe, and the others gathered round us.

I heard Dominic's voice ordering them to stand away. I had my fingers on the handle, but there was pressure against the door from the farther side. Oscar Kahnet moved beside me and thrust his great shoulder against the panel. It resisted our efforts. I wondered why there was no opposition from Groffe and his colleagues, until I saw Dominic standing between themselves and us, a chair held menacingly above his head. I remember thinking that he was making rather free with the hotel furniture. Jura was protesting hysterically from the window bay.

'Don't let them go — keep them back —!' Then a shrill 'Mario — Mario!'

'Drop it,' shouted Dominic.

We made a combined heave, Kahnet and I, and the door burst open outwards. I saw the startled face of Groffe's servant and the shiny barrel of Mario Gualia's revolver. Mario Gualia should have stood farther back — he never did seem able to keep out of trouble, that

man. The clip I caught him on the jaw lifted him off his feet and laid him flat. Heaven knows who it was who threw the knife. Probably the man that Dominic rewarded with the chair. Afterwards Dominic said he didn't notice. He only saw him crumple. The knife hit a flambé vase in the anteroom and crushed it properly. No shots were fired. Oscar Kahnet picked himself up from the floor where he had fallen when the door gave way.

We descended by the stairs; it was less conspicuous. As we came into the Strand the newsboys were crying, 'NO HOPE OF SETTLEMENT!' 'STRIKE A CERTAINTY!' People were looking at us curiously, which was not surprising.

'Let's go and buy ourselves some hats,' Dominic suggested.

7

Oscar Kahnet led us into a small restaurant of an exclusive kind, of which, from the obsequious welcome accorded him, it was evident he was an habitué.

It was curious how we followed him without question. Tacitly we appeared to have enlisted ourselves under his banner. His baffling personality had bewildered Noelle. For the share he had had in her father's untimely end I knew that she wanted to hate him, but the emotion of hatred is difficult to compel, and more than once during a brief walk across the Strand and up Southampton Street I saw her looking at him with a puzzled expression. That he was aware of this, I have no doubt, for under her searching glances he assumed an innocent unconsciousness that was rather droll.

Except for two lovers, we had the restaurant to ourselves, and they, resenting our arrival, left in haste. Oscar Kahnet ordered the lunch with an exquisite nicety which earned the admiration of Dominic, who, upon occasion, was an enthusiast in the matter of victuals.

'I only hope we'll be left in peace to enjoy it,' he said devoutly.

Oscar Kahnet's reply depressed me.

'There are several of my men outside.'

'I'm beginning to look forward to a time when I can go about without a chaperon,' said I.

At that he sighed over the wine list and quoted Browning dulcetly:

'A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?'

Then, turning to the *sommelier*, 'Number 29. The Mersault Goût d'Or.' He nodded at Dominic, and added, 'It comes from the private vineyard of the Hôtel de l'Europe at Bourg. A gentle, smooth wine, tasting like September sunshine.'

It did, too; indeed, everything he ordered was delicious.

He made no attempt to address Noelle, which I thought rather graceful, yet he contrived to be as perfect a host to her as to the rest of us.

With the arrival of coffee and brandy, he leaned across the table and spoke to Noelle for the first time.

'Before we can consider the future,' he trilled, 'I must correct some false impressions of the past.'

Noelle caught her breath slightly and nodded.

'If you can,' she said.

‘Why not?’ he answered. ‘Since my arrival at the Savoy this morning, you have been trying to divine the truth about me and about my share in your father’s death. On psychological grounds, his death may, perhaps, be laid at my door. What I mean is this. I overestimated the vigour of his nervous system. I did not realise that, like most highly imaginative persons, he was susceptible to panic.’

Noelle coloured angrily.

‘Ah, please, don’t think I am belittling a very great man,’ he protested. ‘I am the last to do that. Yet what I say is true. Michael Wilbur lost his life because, for a moment, away up in the clouds, he lost his head.’

Noelle leaned across the table with her hands tightly shut.

‘Why do you say that? What proof have you for saying that?’

‘Every circumstance connected with his death points to that conclusion. You think — and probably Shaftoe thinks — that the pilot of the airplane which bore him on that last journey was in my employment. He was not. The pilot was a Frenchman, who, apart from the fact that he brought the plane to England secretly, was innocent of all knowledge of the affair. He picked up your father on a lonely part of Salisbury Plain on a late evening in March, 1912. This I know, for I, myself, arrived at that spot less than a minute after the airplane had risen from the ground. Your father for many weeks had been relentlessly harried, not only by the organisation I represented, but by others, among which was a certain gang of Continental rogues whose attentions, I suspect, are at present being

redirected against our friend here' — and he nodded at me. 'He had arrived at a state of nervous apprehension in which he could trust no one. It seems probable that he addressed the pilot, or gave an order, which, owing to the roar of the engine, was never heard. At this, bereft of reason, he drew his pistol and fired a shot at the petrol tank of the machine. I, myself, saw a bullet hole in the tank when examining the wreckage. What happened after that is a matter of surmise. The pilot, fearing for his life, may have struggled with your father or thrown him out. The machine must have ignited a few moments later and crashed in flames with its single occupant at Sompting.'

His reconstruction of the tragedy complete, he pushed back his chair and looked Noelle squarely in the eyes.

'Please do not think I am trying to exonerate myself from blame. I am not. My responsibility is plain. It may be that you will count that responsibility great enough to warrant an action of vengeance, but, before committing yourself to any such course, consider the suffering and injustice that will result from it. Fate has put an instrument of vengeance in your hands against which I am, perhaps, strong enough to defend myself. But there are tens and hundreds of thousands of innocent people who will be powerless to defend themselves. Their security, which was in the hands of the great oil combines of the world, has now passed into yours.'

Noelle was about to speak, but he begged her silence with a gesture.

'An instantaneous fortune can be acquired only at

the price of human suffering. When this spectre of the past rose from the shadows of that little thicket in the downs, I made the mistake of trying to lay it by bribery. Miss Wilbur, I now realise the futility of my action in making that proposal. A higher inducement than money is called for to persuade you to destroy all memory of your father's invention, and, realising that, I will not insult you by offering to buy your silence, but I will ask you to give it to the world for nothing.'

I looked at Dominic and was thankful to see that there was no vestige of cynicism in his expression.

I looked at Noelle and saw that her eyes were burning like beacons. The decision rested with her, and I doubt if any decision of equal magnitude was made more briefly.

'Very well,' she said.

That was all. Oscar Kahnet rose and bowed.

'This is a very great lady,' he said.

8

With the passage of time I find it hard to recall, in their proper order, the events of that afternoon.

Under our unobtrusive escort, we walked together to the offices of the World United in Kingsway. The crowded pavements were fluttering with special editions of the evening papers. An ominous excitement, recalling the evening of August, 1914, before the declaration of war, prevailed everywhere. There seemed to be an unusual number of police in the streets. Since the war, England has become inured to strikes and puts up with them with characteristic good-humour. I

wondered, therefore, why this particular threat should be causing so much consternation.

'You'd have thought they'd have realised the futility of a general strike after the shemozzle in nineteen twenty-six,' said Dominic, and rambled off into reminiscences of his own share in that business 'down Poplar way.'

Oscar Kahnet turned at once to the market quotations. What he found brought a frown to his lineless forehead.

'Queer, isn't it!' he said, and, handing the folded news-sheet to me, pointed at the prices of oil shares. In every instance a heavy fall was recorded.

'Before the last strike, oil went right up.'

I was slow to grasp the significance of this decline and put a question.

'MW-XX.3,' was the laconic reply.

'But who knows ——' I began.

'My dear Shaftoe, there is no beast with longer ears than the money market. You surely do not imagine the secret is a secret still?'

As we passed through the swing doors of the World United, our escort melted away like steam.

My friend the hall porter was back at his post. I greeted him with a smile which he seemed dubious about returning. In one of the long corridors we met a young man who exhibited a black eye, nicely advanced in colouring. I noticed that he stepped back quickly to let us go by. Dominic pulled up and stared at him.

'Did I, by any chance?' he queried.

'You certainly did,' was the rueful reply.

'Sorry, old chum,' said Dominic, and shook hands with the boy.

Oscar Kahnet conducted us to Mr. Cole's office. The little manager was not present.

I had imagined, with national affairs in this critical condition, that Oscar Kahnet would be inundated with work, but in that hive of industry he was the one idle figure. In answer to my expression of surprise, he replied:

'The organisation for these eventualities has been in existence for years. It only requires to be operated.'

Noelle asked him if he believed there would be a general strike. He shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, yes — I suppose so.'

'When?'

'The ultimatum expires at noon to-morrow. But we shall beat them in a week. Oil will beat them — oil always calms these troubled waters.'

A rumbling in the street below took us to the window. A mile-long convoy of three-ton lorries and road tank wagons and great purple Scammells clanked up Kingsway like the links of a chain.

'H'm,' said Dominic. 'They don't mean to be taken by surprise. Rather provocative, though,' he added.

I could see that he was itching to be doing something. He looked at me piteously.

'We ought to be in this, Bob. Our own adventure has died on us — thanks to this young cup o' tea.' He threw a smile at Noelle.

Since she had made her choice, I think we all felt that life had gone rather flat. We had passed through days charged with excitement and had drifted into a backwater.

Oscar Kahnet put a hand on my shoulder.

'For the present,' he said, 'it wouldn't be safe. Later we may devise a way to protect the secret. In learning how the stuff is made you committed a terrible mistake. Until then a sheet of paper was in jeopardy — now it is your life. Do not let the resolves we made this afternoon be nullified by thoughtlessness.'

'But look here,' I protested, 'if we advertise in the papers that there is no intention of exploiting the stuff — that the formula has been destroyed ——'

'It still exists,' said he.

'The formula can be destroyed,' I persisted.

Oscar Kahnet shook his head.

'You are the formula,' he said, 'and we have reason to know that there are plenty of people ready and waiting to exploit you.'

I shrugged my shoulders and looked gloomily out of the window.

The wood paving was undergoing repairs, which reduced the roadway to rather less than half its normal width. The tail of the great convoy was just passing out of the narrow section when the steering-gear of a Foden lorry, travelling south, went out of control with the result that it crashed broadside into the last of the Scammells. The force of the collision was so great that the rear of the Scammell was knocked clean through the rails into the shallow trench where the wood blocks had been removed and the concrete bed broken up. The front axle of the Foden was torn from the springs, and down she came on her dumb irons like a man praying. Simultaneously, the driver of a Leyland, with a cargo of steel girders projecting fifteen feet be-

yond the chassis, lost his head, and, swinging the wheel over, apparently with the intention of avoiding the wreckage ahead, went slap into the side of a Covent Garden market cart, laden with baskets, which were strewn in every direction. The projecting steel girder, swinging round as he turned, struck an arc light standard and brought it crashing to the ground to join the general confusion. In something less than ten seconds, there was a double barricade across Kingsway with a clear space of perhaps twenty-five yards between the two piles of wreckage. In that space was the start of the road that runs into Kingsway with the London Opera House at one corner and the branch of Cosways Bank in which I kept my account on the other. Either one of the two collisions would have been enough to draw a crowd, but the two occurring simultaneously drew a multitude. From every quarter people swarmed to the scene of the disaster, while from north and south the whole roadway choked up with accumulated traffic that could move neither forward nor back.

From our window we had a bird's-eye view of the whole affair, and until Dominic clutched my arm it never occurred to me that it was anything more than a rather grotesque accident. Dominic was pointing at the narrow roadway opposite, up which a light lorry, of the kind employed by the Air Force, was slowly backing to the corner.

'Don't you recognise it?' he cried. 'The Crossley that paid us a visit yesterday — at Xavier.'

'Yes, but ——' I began.

'That hole in the tail board through which the pole was stuck! Man, I'd know it anywhere.'

There was certainly a strong resemblance between the two vehicles, but I doubt if I should have connected one with the other but for Dominic's assurance.

'But what are they doing here?' I demanded, 'unless ——'

As I spoke the truth dawned on me. It was not us they were after, but my bank — my bank in which they supposed I had deposited the formula. They had reason, too, for that supposition, since the mysterious stranger who had addressed me on the pavement outside the offices of the World United on the morning of my interview with Oscar Kahnet must have watched me cross the road and enter the bank, where I had remained several minutes before returning to my car.

The preliminaries for a second raid were being enacted before our eyes, which, with the knowledge we had of the kind of artillery likely to be concealed behind the draped tarpaulin that hung behind that lorry, might well be attended with catastrophe to a hundred people.

9

If Oscar Kahnet had guessed our intentions, I have little doubt that he would have died in an attempt to prevent our leaving the office, but we didn't stop to tell him anything. Dominic's motive in plunging into the business was clear enough. He shouted it as we ran down the office corridor:

'I'll grab one of those birds or bust.'

My own motive was not so clear, since I knew the formula to be safely concealed in a cigarette-tin buried

under a millstone in the back garden at Xavier. I imagine some kind of citizenship spurred me on.

As we clattered down the stairs, I yelled my explanation of the affair in Dominic's ear.

'The formula — the copy of the formula — they think it's in Cosways Bank.'

'And is it?' he threw back at me.

'No.'

He gripped my arm joyously and hastened me on.

'Then, by gosh, here's a fight we can't lose.'

The pavement before the World United was deserted — every one having crowded round the wreckage opposite. We flashed across it, vaulted a low wall of wood blocks, and waded — I acknowledge it with shame — across an area of wet concrete that had been laid only an hour before. It was quicker to go round than through the mass of humanity and vehicles that were surging in the neighbourhood of the double collision. Yelled at by a policeman and hotly pursued by an outraged concrete expert, we did a fifty-yard sprint up Kingsway, ducked under the barrier posts, and wormed our way through an orgy of vehicles of different classes and denominations.

'Right round the Opera House and come on 'em up the side street!' Dominic hooted in my ear.

The pavement was clear and we ran.

'Best figure out what we're going to do,' I gasped.

'Do! We're going to sink that lorry for a start — the rest can look after itself.'

It sounded a tallish order, although in the war Dominic had acquired an enviable reputation for dealing with marauding craft. But that was at sea. If the

lorry contained, as we had reason to suppose, a machine gun fore and aft, our chances of keeping his promise were remote.

At the far side of the Opera House, a taxi with its engine running stood by the kerb. The driver was enjoying a cup of coffee at a stall on the opposite side of the street.

'Sent from heaven!' cried Dominic, leapt into the driving-seat, and jammed in the gear. 'Onto the running-board, Bob, and shout like hell!'

The advice was sound, for, as we swung round the corner and came into the narrow road where the raiders' lorry was parked, a number of people were about.

The shindy we made sent them scattering for the pavements like chickens. Dominic leaned forward and pushed down the hand throttle to the full. We never got into top gear; he kept the taxi screaming in second. We were going hard rather than fast, you understand. Side-stepping onto the running-board beside me, he steered with his left hand only.

'Prepare to abandon ship!' he cried, and slugged the wheel over as we jumped.

I had a brief glimpse, no more, of the face of the man in the driving-seat of the lorry, and, I may say, it was radiant with surprise. Our commandeered taxi caught the radiator of his vehicle plumb and lifted the engine clean off its lugs. The rest of the taxi seemed to fold up behind like a book. Inside the lorry something stuttered madly. The sound was too continuous to have the character of shots. With what breath was left in his body, after the impact, the driver screamed —

twice; after that he lolled over sideways like a child dropping asleep.

I must, by nature, be a typical rubber-neck, for, instead of making myself useful, I must needs stand gaping. Dominic's action was more to the point. He was round at the back of that lorry almost before the collision took place. A terrified head was thrust out from behind the tarpaulin curtain. Dominic grabbed its owner by the neck and swung him over the tail board. The sound made by that man's body as it hit the asphalt was as unhealthy as anything I can remember.

If I had had a grain of sense, I should have realised that there was another man in the lorry — the man whose machine gun had jarred off and drilled the driver. Dominic was yelling to the crowd to guard the lorry.

'Full of machine guns!' he shouted. That was foolish of him, for it had the result of discouraging for the moment many willing helpers. In that moment of hesitation, the third man made good his escape. His standing jump from the interior of the lorry was a credit to him. He landed an inch from where I stood and crossed his right to my belt line with a smack that bent me double. The blow was a scrap too high to wind me, and as he plunged into the gaping crowd I had a glimpse of his white hair and pointed ears. That was the only time I ever really admired James War-rinder. He used his wits in an emergency, for if he had hared down the road instead of mixing with the crowd he wouldn't have had a dog's chance of getting away. He was saved by numbers. In two seconds he had

ceased to be an individual and had become part of the population.

Heavens knows where the four policemen came from. Dominic must have materialised them with his exhortations to the crowd.

'Never mind us, they are raiding the bank!' he shouted.

How we got round the corner and into the bank, I am not very clear. But we did it. Dominic, the four policemen, and I formed the apex of a wedge of humanity that fairly lifted us through the double doors.

It all happened too quickly for the men who were working the hold-up to be aware of what was occurring round the corner. I saw a row of clerks and cashiers lined up behind the counter with their hands in the air. Three other men were covering them with automatics. The scene was in the nature of a tableau which our entrance rudely shattered. Followed a swift reshuffle of positions — the raiders backing before an advance and looking wildly to left and right for a way of escape. An excited cashier seized an ebony ruler and threw it — at Dominic, who ducked.

Then one of the raiders cried, 'Stand clear, or we'll shoot!'

I, for one, believed him — as did others of the crowd, to judge by an easing of the pressure behind us. But it is not in the nature of a London policeman to credit any threat so rude and violent. With a careless disregard of danger, coupled with a majesty peculiar to the force, the largest constable of the four detached himself from our ranks and, approaching the man who had spoken, remarked reproachfully, 'None of that.'

I imagine that it is psychologically impossible to take the life of a person who says, 'None of that.' Especially when that person adds the rider, 'And don't act so foolish.'

What followed was in the nature of an anticlimax. With the bashful simplicity of a board-school child offering a posy to a royal visitor, the defeated raider handed over his gun. The two others also delivered up their weapons in exchange for a pair of handcuffs apiece. This ceremony satisfactorily performed, the constable addressed the crowd.

'Back to the paving, the 'ole lot of yew! Wot are you thinkin' of?' said he.

The crowd melted respectfully and a perfect Babel of voices broke out from the clerks and cashiers.

The constable waved them to silence.

'Is this a parrot 'ouse or what?' he demanded. 'One at a time, for Gawd's sake.'

An elderly cashier, who, more often than I care to remember, had informed me that my account was overdrawn, stammered agitatedly that there were 'four more of them in the vaults with Belton the manager.'

Rather gratuitously, so I thought, the constable remarked that they had 'no business down there,' adding that he would 'very soon fetch 'em out of it.'

This, I am bound to say, he did.

The four malefactors, in company with the distracted Mr. Belton, presently emerged from below. During the absence of the police, I had modestly suggested to Dominic that it might be politic to retire, as

indeed was true. Alas, he would hear none of that and insisted on seeing the business through.

The expression on Mr. Belton's face when he beheld me was one of complete bewilderment; clutching a constable's arm, he pointed with a shaking index.

'Why — look — there — that gentleman — Commander Shaftoe — he was responsible for the whole thing.'

The phrase, in the circumstances, was unhappy. From a privileged, if not actually heroic performer I had become, at a word, an object of suspicion. Before I could explain, the leading constable tilted his head toward me and said, 'Take him up.'

From this indignity I was rescued by Mr. Belton.

'No, no — not wittingly — I am sure, but the robbers — those men — they were after a paper presumed to have been deposited in this bank by Commander Shaftoe.'

'You mean it wasn't cash they was after?'

The little manager shook his head.

'No, no, this paper. I really must sit down,' he added — 'a terrible experience — they — they hurt me very much.'

For the first time I noticed a scarlet line embracing his wrist. This he was nursing with his other hand.

'I told them he had deposited nothing, but they' — an expression of pain passed over his features — 'wouldn't believe. They fastened a piece of cord round here and tightened it with a pencil. Agonising! It hurts still — dreadfully.'

From one of the raiders came a sound that might have been a snigger. The effect upon Mr. Belton was

astonishing. Springing to his feet, he hit the man who had laughed an imperial slosh on the nose. I have little doubt that he would have repeated the assault had not the constable restrained him with word and force.

'Set down and be'ave,' he said. 'You'll be gettin' yourself into trouble next.'

In the mean time one of the other policemen had telephoned to the station for an escort. He might have saved himself the trouble, for he had scarcely left the telephone when an inspector and half a dozen constables, attracted to the spot by an instinctive sense of impending promotion, thrust their way through the crowd at the doorway and entered the premises. I do not think my friend the constable was overpleased to hand over the conduct of the affair to a superior officer.

However, since discipline makes punishing demands upon the subordinate, he had no choice.

'Everything's cleaned up and in order, sir,' he observed. 'Ere is the bunch what done it and nothin' of value 'as been took.'

The inspector was a person of morose disposition, who, bitterly chagrined at being too late, comforted himself with passing criticisms and taking meticulous notes. These notes were augmented by Dominic with the startling information that there was a dead man in the lorry round the corner and another man, whose case was not much better, lying in the road.

'Dead men! Who done 'em in?' said the inspector.

'In a sense we did,' said Dominic pleasantly. 'We happened to know there were machine guns aboard the lorry and there was no time to be polite.'

At the reference to machine guns, the inspector

ejaculated, 'Well, for Gawd's sake!' and opened his eyes wide. They narrowed a second later with the advent of suspicion.

The inspector addressed two of the constables who were not actively engaged.

'Walk these two gentlemen round to the station,' said he, 'and don't lose 'em on the way.'

Our predicament, in the circumstances, was none too pleasant. As may be supposed, news of the raid had spread like wildfire and Kingsway, so far as the eye could see, had become a river of angry faces.

Our removal to the station was delayed until the arrival of the squad from Bow Street, but even with their protection our security was by no means assured. The mood of the crowd, strained by anticipation of the strike, was treacherous.

It may be imagined, then, that our reception when we emerged into the street was of a lively, boisterous, and hostile nature. Encouraged by the excitement of the moment, otherwise law-abiding citizens conceived themselves better equipped to deal with our custody than the forces of law and order. On the pavement before the bank a conflict occurred between the police and the people, in which batons and ammunition drawn from the conveniently stacked wall of wood blocks played a conspicuous part.

While engaged in dodging missiles and aiding the police to look after me, I had little enough time for other considerations. I contrived, however, to steal one glance at the windows of the World United and was rewarded by a glimpse of Noelle, with Oscar Kahnet at her elbow, looking anxiously into the street.

Whether she saw me I cannot say, for at that moment I was caught in the face by a dollop of wet concrete, which in an other hour's time would have dried solid enough to brain me.

Dominic and I were sharing a pair of handcuffs and since neither he nor I was possessed of the talents of Houdini we had but a single arm apiece wherewith to defend ourselves. My right hand was free and Dominic's left, and I am bound to say he used it straight and plentifully. I fancy Dominic must have sprung from that stock an elder member of which is credited with the enquiry, 'Is this a private fight or may any one join in?' His love of a scrap was sublime, and when at last the police succeeded in tumbling us into a taxi, an event for which I was extremely grateful, he expressed regret that the more active part of the business was over.

One of the constables remarked in surprise that he never saw a couple of chaps so eager to help the police.

'If you'd 'ad a bit o' sense,' he added, 'you could 'a' made off, the pair of yer.'

The remark struck both of us as intensely funny, and as the taxi, under a barrage of wood blocks, whirled us away through circuitous side streets, we laughed until the tears ran down our cheeks.

10

Our escort, who throughout a difficult ordeal had treated us well and even bravely, assumed a different attitude once they had us safely on their own ground in the police station. The comradeship of battle gave

way to brusqueness, verbal and physical, which was hard to endure with grace.

Dominic and I were relieved of our gyves and were issued with a constable apiece. The raiders had arrived before us, and a more crestfallen company I had never seen. Beholding us in a similar plight to their own cheered them up conspicuously. One of their number, the stocky individual with the huge hands who had conducted the raid in the cellar at Xavier, had the insolence to grin at me.

A massive sergeant, with a bald head (how little one sees of a policeman's hair), who was seated at a kind of davenport, asked what we were charged with.

I do not remember the precise terms of the charge, but, in general, they dealt with feloniously entering a bank and threatening the police with firearms.

The raiders were called up and to a man gave the name of John Smith. Asked where they lived, each replied, 'Nowhere in particular.'

'Lock 'em up, number eighteen.'

'All together, sir?' the gaoler demanded.

'Yes, all together. Now these two men.'

Our turn.

'Same charge?'

The morose inspector nodded. He had suffered in the mêlée, having interrupted the flight of a wood block, and his temper was running higher than his judgment.

'Might as well, and charge 'em, too, with stealing a taxi,' he snapped.

'Look here, my friend, don't be an ass,' said Dominic.

'Silence you!' roared the inspector.

A constable at Dominic's back clapped a hand over his mouth and snatched it away with the cry, 'By Gor! 'E bit me.'

'I thought,' said Dominic, 'you were offering me something to eat.'

I feared something ugly might result, but the situation was saved by the appearance of the majestic constable who single-handed had disarmed the raiders. He was a trifle out of breath and was perspiring freely, but, for all that, he was still an impressive figure.

'S'cuse me, sir,' said he, 'but we'd best go light with these gentlemen. After all, it was them what give the alarm.'

The inspector turned on him like a terrier.

'Keep your opinion till I ask for it,' he snapped.

The telephone at the sergeant's elbow rang incisively. Raising his hand, the sergeant invited the constable to 'old 'is jaw for a moment' while he took the call.

'All ri'. Put 'im through,' said he, and reversed his pen on the charge book while the call was connected. The conversation which followed was one-sided; in fact, it was all on the other side. About halfway through the sergeant stared at us curiously. Presently he said, 'Old on a moment' — and, addressing me, 'What's your name?' I told him. 'And yours,' to Dominic.

Our replies seemed satisfactory, but, as the voice at the other end of the line continued to talk, he became worried.

'I've only your word for that,' said he, 'an' your

word don't justify me lettin' these gentlemen go.' He listened to an interruption, at the conclusion of which he ejaculated, 'What's that? You don't want us to let 'em go? For 'eavung's sake, what do you want? You'd better come round and eggsplain.' He hung up the receiver and scratched his head.

'Was that Mr. Oscar Kahnet?' I asked.

'It was,' he acknowledged. 'Seemed to know all about you, too.'

'Mr. Kahnet doesn't run this department, does he?' the inspector demanded, savagely. 'Are you going to charge these men as I told you?'

'Donno as I am,' replied the sorely perplexed officer. 'Mr. Cainit said he'd been onto the Home Office already.'

Instantly the inspector's manner toward us underwent an agreeable change.

'Perhaps you two gentlemen is connected with the 'Ome Office,' he ventured.

'Only by telephone,' I replied, 'but I am sure you wouldn't wish to do anything to strengthen the connection.'

The underlying threat in the words was swift to reach its mark.

'Let 'em wait in the anteroom,' said the inspector, and personally introduced us to its hospitalities.

He expressed genuine astonishment when I asked if a few policemen might bear us company. The anteroom was situated on the right of the main entrance hall, and when the door was open we could see across and through the main entrance of the police station into the crowded street beyond. As there was only a

single constable on duty at the entrance, I did not feel that I was receiving that degree of protection to which lately I had become accustomed.

I was subjected to a polite but searching enquiry in regard to the bank raid. This interrogatory was conducted by two portentous individuals in plain clothes, who breathed the atmosphere of Scotland Yard. I fear that my answers to their questions were considered unsatisfactory, for, although I supplied details of each assault that had been made upon my person during the last ten days, I declined to offer even a hint of the motives that had inspired my enemies.

Their patience was wearing a trifle thin when a large car drew up before the station steps and a person whom, through the agency of cartoonists, I recognised at once as the Home Secretary alighted and, crossing the vestibule, came swiftly into the anteroom. He was followed at a slower rate by another man whose features were vaguely familiar to me. At their approach the Scotland Yard officers sprang to their feet and saluted with a nice mixture of respect and apprehension.

Sir Hubert Frayne, the Home Secretary, was a tall, lean man, with broad brows and sharp, eager features; his companion was of a more solid build and looked like a successful business man. Without so much as acknowledging the salute, Sir Hubert peered at me closely.

'Commander Shaftoe? I am seeking Commander Shaftoe,' said he.

I rose and bowed.

'Show me to a private room immediately.'

We were led to another and smaller apartment and the door was closed behind us.

'This,' said Sir Hubert, 'is Sir Devon Watts, President of the Board of Trade. Sit down, Shaftoe. I have, as you will appreciate, little time to spare, but in the present circumstances, and I refer to the practical certainty of a general strike at noon to-morrow, your case is one that requires immediate investigation. You have in your possession the secret of a synthetic petroleum, the efficiency of which is not in doubt. Please don't interrupt. The fact is now common knowledge. The evening papers are full of it. Mr. Kahnet has spoken to me on the telephone about it. A Madame Gualia, daughter of the inventor, has applied this afternoon for an injunction to prevent you exploiting the stuff, an application has also been made for your arrest by a Mr. Mischa Groffe, on a charge of stealing the formula from the dead inventor's body. This afternoon's raid in Kingsway, certain peculiar happenings down in Sussex, and a sharp fall in the price of oil shares are all attributable to the same cause.'

'I thought you had already spoken to Oscar Kahnet,' said I.

'I have, and he gave me an assurance that you have no immediate intention of exploiting the substitute.'

'Neither immediate nor future,' I amended.

Sir Hubert shook his head.

'So you say — but how can one be sure?'

'You have my word,' said I.

'But you are only human,' he retorted, 'and susceptible like the rest of humanity to pressure. From

the Opposition alone I can promise that you will not lack for pressure.'

He looked at Sir Devon Watts, who nodded grimly.

'Let me understand,' said I. 'Are you suggesting that the Opposition — that Labour — would encourage the manufacture of this substance?'

'They would encourage anything that would ensure our collapse at the next election.'

There was a knock on the door and an inspector entered nervously.

'Yes, what is it? I am not to be disturbed,' said the Home Secretary in an angry voice.

'Beg your pardon, Sir Hubert, sir, but Mr. Walter Node is on the telephone.'

'Ha!' cried the Home Secretary and pointed a quivering finger at me. 'Now do you believe, my young friend? Node — the leader of the Opposition.'

Things were certainly moving fast. Sir Hubert swung round on the inspector.

'What's he want?'

'He asked leave, sir, Sir Hubert, to interview the — this gentleman.'

'Tell him,' said the Home Secretary — 'tell him that he can go — no, not that — that he can see no one.'

'Very good, Sir Hubert.'

With the retirement of the inspector, Sir Hubert's countenance registered despair.

'As if there wasn't enough on my hands without this!' he sighed. 'I don't know what to do with you.'

His perplexity, as well as mine, was answered in the most abrupt fashion by the reappearance of the inspector with Dominic at his heels.

The Home Secretary turned like a rattlesnake upon the intruders.

'The next man who comes into this room loses his job,' he snapped.

'But, Sir Hubert,' the man stammered. 'I had to tell you, sir — the news — I ——'

'What news?'

'A lightning strike of the transport workers,' the inspector replied.

'What!' cried the Home Secretary, and even the unemotional countenance of Sir Devon Watts assumed an expression of the liveliest amazement.

'The men have left their vehicles where they happened to be,' the inspector continued. 'Left 'em with engines runnin' — just anywhere. You never saw such a sight as the Strand, and, accordin' to messages received, Oxford Street is no better. Underground has stopped, too,' he added, 'and all the railways.'

The Home Secretary looked at the President of the Board of Trade and back to the inspector.

'I must get back to the Home Office at once,' Sir Hubert muttered. 'This will mean martial law by six o'clock.'

In his agitation I had hoped that he would forget all about me, which he might well have done had not the enormous figure of Oscar Kahnet blocked the doorway at the moment he was preparing to leave by it.

'Out of my way, please, I have not a minute to lose,' he exclaimed.

In his eagerness to depart the Home Secretary stepped this way and that, like a dancing-master.

'No, no — no time.'

'I have reason to fear,' said Kahnet, 'that attacks may be made on the Petrol Storage and Tank Farms on the Thames and Mersey Banks. Information received a few moments ago ——'

'Ah, damn it, man!' cried the exasperated Minister, 'protection has been allotted. Special detachments of the Guards will be despatched by road first thing to-morrow morning.'

'To-morrow may be too late. There is no certainty that the roads will be clear. The city thoroughfares are already blocked with abandoned vehicles. The troops should be sent by the water — and at once.'

I have seen before, and no doubt will see again the influence of personal pride and jealousy in matters of administration.

'Mr. Kahnet,' said Sir Hubert bitingly, 'I do not ask for, nor am I likely to adopt your rulings in matters which pertain to my department. You will oblige me by removing yourself from the doorway.'

He was certainly unprepared for Oscar Kahnet's reply.

'Hubert, you're an ass. The one thing that stands between this country and ruin in the course of the next few days is oil. If you fail to protect oil, you are lost.'

'I attribute your lack of manners to anxiety to protect your shareholders' interests, and now will you stand aside or must I order the police to remove you?'

No doubt he felt he had spoken the last word. His emphasis rang with that suggestion. He did not count on what I can best describe as the schoolboy insolence of his adversary. As Oscar Kahnet moved from the

door he bowed ironically, and trebled the words, 'Good-bye, England.'

'That's damned cheek!' said the Home Secretary, and so became human.

He and the President of the Board of Trade hastened across the vestibule and down the steps to where the car was waiting at the kerb.

II

The Home Secretary had left no instructions regarding my custody and I flatter myself that I revealed some presence of mind in saying to the inspector, 'I suppose it is no good asking you to get me a taxi.'

'I'm afraid not, sir,' he replied gloomily. But the answer was a tacit acceptance of my title to enjoy liberty.

I shrugged my shoulders and turned to Oscar Kahnet.

'Then there is nothing for it but to walk,' said I.

He nodded grimly.

'The rest of London will be *à pied* to-night. But I have a car waiting off Drury Lane.'

It speaks for the enormous bulk of the man when I say that until she moved toward me I was unaware that Noelle was behind him. With their positions reversed, she looked like a very small lamb on an immense hillside.

'We're going to his house to-night,' she said. 'He thought it would be safer.'

We four were allowed to leave the station without hindrance. The spectacle which greeted us from the pavement was unique. Vehicles of every description,

some with engines running, were marooned in the roadway. No attempt had been made to park them by the kerb; they stood where their drivers had left them — empty, neglected, and palpitating. A handful of police and a few volunteers were endeavouring to clear some kind of avenue up the centre of Drury Lane, to allow owner-driver cars to go by. Their efforts, however, were not very fruitful of success. Apart from opposition from the rougher element of the crowd, many of the vehicles, notably big steam tractors with trailers behind, defied the attempts of those who heaved and tugged and pushed.

No doubt it was all very tragic and regrettable, but Noelle saw a funny side to the affair which communicated itself to me, and we laughed. I never saw a man extract less humour from any situation than Oscar Kahnet. I suppose this was not altogether surprising, for to the organising brain, the brain which reduces even the simplest and most ordinary events and actions to an exact science, anything in the nature of chaos is anathema.

As we walked along the crowded, jostling pavements, he bore his chin on his breast and glowered darkly.

I had Noelle by the arm and Dominic was on the other side of her.

'You're a nice one,' I complained. 'I thought you were going to leave us to languish in the police station for life.'

'So did I at one time,' she nodded. 'Just after the bank raid a huge crowd gathered outside the World United offices and the other big oil company at the corner of Kingsway. Hundreds of them there were —

transport workers, he said' — nodding at Oscar Kahnet — 'men who had left the buses and things in the Strand and Holborn. They crowded round the doors and sang "The Red Flag," and then began sling-
ing wood blocks through the windows.'

'How did you get away?' I asked.

'We didn't until they had gone, and they didn't go until they'd used up all the ammunition.'

'The wood blocks?'

She nodded.

'Would you have cared if anything had happened to me?' I whispered.

Noelle lifted reproachful eyes to me and Dominic dropped back two paces and joined Oscar Kahnet.

'How can what happens make a difference to my feelings for you,' she asked.

'No,' said I; 'no, I suppose not,' and was crestfallen.

'If you want me to say I love you, ask me and I'll say it willingly. I do love you, Bob, but not for side-shows — not because you prance into scraps, and don't mind danger, and cut rather an heroic figure all round. I love you for yourself.'

At these wonderful, amazing, soul-stirring words I stepped so abruptly upon a piece of orange peel that my feet vanished from under me and I was delivered flat upon my back in the gutter. Yet here was a calamity not great enough to be heeded.

'Noelle,' I said, scrambling to my feet and grabbing her arm, 'to my dying day you will never be forgiven ——'

'Forgiven what?'

'Saying what you said here — on this crowded pave-

ment — in all this muddle and chaos. Wretched and adorable girl, don't you love me well enough to have waited until we were alone?'

'What's it matter?' said she, and the laughter in her eyes was like rain in violets. 'I love you and I brought you to my feet.'

How closely the ridiculous walks upon the heels of the sublime! In that moment of transcendent ecstasy — from the empyrean into which I had ascended — Oscar Kahnet plucked me with the words, 'Here is the car. I'm afraid we shall find it a tight squeeze.'

12

How bitterly I hated that enormous man as with Noelle beside him he occupied the back loges of the car, leaving to Dominic and myself two insignificant leather brackets undeserving of the name of seats! Noelle loved me — she had declared it — and all my being was crying out to prove by a multiplicity of kissings and pressings that her love was not given in vain. And yet in that small, crowded limousine we were as surely parted from each other or any expression of ourselves as we should have been had an ocean intervened.

Oscar Kahnet and Dominic Vane had eyes and speech for nothing but the miles of stationary and neglected vehicles which encumbered the streets. Doubtless it was a strange sight, and yet I give my word it left in my mind not one single clear impression. I was occupied alone with a passionate insurgence — a longing for a solitude of two.

Once I spoke soundless words to Noelle, but chance persuaded Oscar Kahnet to turn his eyes on me as I

framed them and to demand sharply, 'What — what was that? Speak up.'

Greatly incensed by this, to me, unwarrantable curiosity, in a fit of unguarded indignation, I told him roundly, giving the words a bitter emphasis, what it was I had said.

'Darling, dearest,' said I, 'since you insist on asking.'

Apparently he did not think the observation worthy of notice, for he turned his head and continued to glare sullenly at the derelict traffic.

It takes a brave man to write himself down an ass, and I do not suppose my staunchest friend will quarrel with the definition. The bald truth is that Noelle had knocked me out at a single blow. I was stunned and did not come to myself until the car was threading its way along the north side of Hyde Park.

13

My recovery, if I may so call it, was expedited by the action of an individual who made us a free gift of a King Dick spanner by the simple expedient of slinging it through the window. Its arrival was heralded by a shower of glass which we divided amongst ourselves. No one was hit, which, having regard to the congestion inside the car, was surprising. Dominic, ever an opportunist, recovered the spanner from the floor and returned it, with better success, to its previous owner. Through the small back window of the car I was afforded a happy glimpse of a solitary figure bent double and clasping his belly with every indication of woe.

A moment later the car drew up before one of those

immense white-painted mansions in Lancaster Gate whose windows overlook the park.

A butler opened the door before we had alighted from the car, and Oscar Kahnet lost no time in bundling us toward the house. His reason for doing so was apparent, for a great concourse of people had gathered outside the park railings to watch the Mechanical Transport Volunteers forming a huge petrol dump under the trees and the soldiery set up camp in preparation for the strike. Many onlookers, unable to see over the shoulders of earlier arrivals, had crossed the road and were lined up along the terrace upon which the house stood. Even the steps of the house accommodated watchers, who, fearing they would be dispossessed, betrayed unwillingness to let us pass.

My faculties for observation, being centred entirely upon Noelle, were not at their most acute. I had not bothered to take stock of any one, but no sooner had the door closed behind us than Dominic announced, 'That little wop Mario what's-his-name is out there.'

'Best place for him,' said I, for I had long passed the expectation of being allowed to go anywhere without a follower.

'What about going and hauling him in?' he suggested.

But Oscar Kahnet discouraged any such idea.

'I wonder when you two young men will realise the seriousness of this undertaking and give up behaving like rowdy schoolboys,' said he. 'I have brought you here and I mean to keep you here, so please remember it.'

Speaking so, I felt he was carrying the duties of a

host a little farther than civility demanded. This he may have realised, for he dropped a hand on my shoulder with a gesture almost of affection.

For my own part I had no quarrel with the idea of staying with him since Noelle was of the company. My only regret — and one shared by the others — was an absence of anything in the way of personal effects. Beyond what we stood up in, we did not possess a single article of raiment.

I asked the footman to ring up the hotel and enquire whether they could rescue our belongings and have them despatched by messenger. This he did and returned later with the information that, although the suitcases had been safely bestowed in the baggage-room, it was impossible to despatch them owing to lack of transport. The car, he said, had been removed to an adjacent garage to await collection.

Making the best of a bad job, I took off my clothes, washed, shaved, put them on again, and went downstairs. As I reached the first-floor landing, a mild voice, coming from behind a half-open door, called upon me to enter.

I did so and found myself in an enormous room utterly barren of decorative taste. The word 'barren' is, perhaps, an unhappy choice, since every square inch of that room was cluttered up with articles of furniture, great and small, china vases, what-nots, mirrors, knick-knacks, and pictures of a most distressing kind. I do not remember ever having seen an apartment so abundantly rich in trash. It is possible, even probable, that some of the exhibits had a commercial value, but of artistic merit they had none. The whole place was a

riot of mismated colours and periods. Ebony, mother-of-pearl, gilt, and rosewood were jumbled together like particles of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. It was, if not actually vulgar, the apotheosis of bad taste. Calling to mind the small, naked office in which Oscar Kahnet spent the working hours of his day, I was amazed to find such blinding rococo in his home.

In my surprise I fear I stood rudely gaping in the doorway, forgetful of the voice which had summoned me to enter. I may perhaps be pardoned for not having seen my hostess against such a busy background, for when at length my eyes fell upon her it was to behold a little, grey woman of the middle years, dressed in clothes of Quakerish simplicity. She stepped forward to greet me, looking for all the world like a dove in a fancy bazaar.

‘Mr. Shaftoe,’ she said, with a timid inflection which seemed to suggest that were I to reply, ‘I am not Mr. Shaftoe,’ she would go away into a corner and cry.

I bowed and said, ‘Are you ——?’

‘I’m Mrs. Kahnet,’ said she.

I was unaware until then that Oscar Kahnet was a married man, and certainly had never expected that he would have equipped himself with so modest a wife. I murmured something about her kindness in showing us so much hospitality. At this she shook her head — though for what reason I cannot say.

‘Mr. Kahnet will be here soon,’ she said, ‘unless you would rather wait in the smoking-room.’

‘I would very much rather talk to you,’ I replied gallantly, and repented of saying so when I saw the blush the words brought to her pale cheeks.

'This strike,' said I, 'looks like being a bad business.'

'Oh, yes,' said she.

The conversation died. I drifted to the window and looked out. It was deep dusk and all over the park lights twinkled and fires were burning. In the absence of anything like regular traffic, the quiet was uncanny. Instead of the usual rumble of wheels, there was a softer and more metrical sound — the patter, patter of many thousands of feet. London's workers were walking home.

'Left, left, left,' a self-appointed leader commanded. The old refrain drifted up to me —

'Oh, I had a good home and I left — *left* — *left*
And don't you think I was right — *right* — *right*.'

It became an infection — an old war seed disseminated among the masses and flourishing into song. The air throbbed with it.

It was stirring to see how well they stepped out and kept time — that shadowy battalion that had learned the measure of its stride on the highways of France, at Ploeg Street, and along the dusty ribbon of the Arras-Doullens road. Then as now the same indifference, the same stoic philosophy, the same imperishable good-humour sustained them.

The sight warmed the heart, and I cannot say how long I stood looking down upon it with a mind that slipped back over a decade into the past. The voice of Oscar Kahnet roused me from my reverie.

'The others are in my study,' said he, 'and, as I see no prospect of a restful evening, I must deny myself the pleasure of spending it in this room.'

My face must have betrayed astonishment, for with a smile he explained.

'Perhaps you do not find these decorations restful. No, no, I see you don't. Yet to me this room affords a sense of relaxation that I experience nowhere else.' Then, seeing he had only increased my bewilderment: 'After all, what is rest and relaxation but an escape from the thoughts and considerations uppermost in one's mind. In this room, which my dear wife has painstakingly filled with every conceivable example of bad art, it is impossible for a person to think at all. Even you, my dear Shaftoe, in general a fluent and abundant talker, are at this moment bereft of speech. Take my advice if ever you stand in need of a mental holiday — look for it in a crowd — seek it in chaos; for I assure you that solitude and austere simplicity are the surest provocatives of mental exhaustion known to man.'

So saying, he marched out, leaving me to follow with his wife. While standing by the door to allow her to pass, I chanced to notice that she was biting her lower lip as though in pain. With a clumsiness for which I afterwards reproached myself I asked what ailed her.

'It is nothing,' she said, 'nothing really. Mr. Kahnet always says that to visitors about my drawing-room. He means it, too, only ——' she hesitated.

'Yes?' said I.

'Only,' she repeated, 'I like it, you see — I'm fond of it.'

I could scarcely believe my ears.

'Why not?' I stammered.

She shed upon me a smile of the deepest gratitude.

In fairness to our host and the immense weight of responsibility depending upon him at that time, I must set down that, throughout dinner, he showed us every courtesy and kindness. I cannot believe our society was in any way welcome, but it stands to his credit that he gave it the complexion of welcome.

During dinner, which was a protracted affair, for he was an exacting if not excessive eater, he was called to the telephone no less than half a dozen times. But even these interruptions failed to ruffle his equanimity, though I guessed from his occasional lapses into a reflective silence that they were of a serious nature. Every time the distant bell summoned him, Mrs. Kahnet said, 'There!' and added, 'Poor Oscar!' as he went from the room.

With marvellous insight, the gentle soul had divined how it was with Noelle and myself. This divination and the consequent sweetness that she showered upon us from her soft grey eyes shattered my conception of the fallibility of authors. She, at least, was a friend to lovers.

I do not think love for the individual had any existence in Oscar Kahnet. His affections were of a more spacious and godlike kind. They embraced thousands of workers and dependents in all parts of the world. Men and women he neither knew nor would ever meet. It is not surprising then that he was unconscious of the silent adoration I was bestowing upon Noelle at his dinner table.

Poor Dominic, however, to judge by the melancholy cast of his features, had already grasped the truth. I imagine that he was metaphorically digging the grave

of a bachelor and that the task was uncongenial. Once he caught my eye and shook his head very sorrowfully as who should say, 'There goes another good man down the road.'

Out of the blue he remarked: 'I suppose a time like we've had the last few days couldn't be expected to last — unless' — he tilted his head on one side and addressed Noelle — 'unless you change your mind about that promise at lunch — and defy our gallant host and boil up the pickles a second time.'

'I'd do anything to please you,' said Noelle.

'Oh, no, you wouldn't,' he replied. 'Nobody cares for me. I just get hauled in when there's a scuffle, and pushed out when it's over. Nobody cares for me.' He stopped — hit the table an unexpected blow and exclaimed in the loud voice of a man who has made a great discovery — 'Anne! There's a nice girl! An extraordinarily nice girl! Did she put up her hands when those beggars pulled the hold-up? She did not. Did she call you down when she thought you'd given in without a fight? She certainly did. Anne! I tell you she's a girl in a thousand. I must look into this.'

So sudden was this eulogy of my little sister as to rob me of speech.

'But who is Anne?' Mrs. Kahnet enquired.

'One in a thousand,' was the hearty rejoinder.

'If that is so,' said Mrs. Kahnet, without a vestige of humor, 'I think you should certainly look into it.'

'I promise you I will,' said Dominic. 'What's more, I'll start now.'

Casting his napkin to the floor, he rose, kissed the

hand of our hostess, and hurried from the room in search of Oscar Kahnet, who was at the telephone.

A moment later he returned, buttoning himself into a borrowed ulster. Oscar Kahnet was at his heels with an expression of resignation on his face.

'This young man is determined to leave us,' he said, 'and as, by doing so, he can harm only himself, I shall not try to prevent him.'

'I'll be back by noon to-morrow,' said Dominic. 'After all, the old man'll be glad to have news of us. I'll streak down to the Savoy, grab the car, and have a night ride. I may pick up some fun on the way.'

It seemed not improbable he would. He gripped my hand, twiddled his fingers at Noelle, and a second later the front door banged behind him. Oscar Kahnet retired to his study.

'What an extraordinary man!' said Mrs. Kahnet. 'Was he sincere about your sister?'

'Probably,' I said. 'Dominic has his dull periods, but he is susceptible to shafts of illumination.'

'Do men fall in love like that — all of a sudden?' Noelle asked.

'Just like that,' I nodded — 'only more so.'

'Well, I must say,' said Mrs. Kahnet, 'I am very glad you all came to dinner.'

I do not think she had the slightest idea why any of us were there. It was not the practice of Oscar Kahnet to admit even his wife to his counsels.

She stood watching us with a sort of benign embarrassment which found expression in the words, 'Although I think it is very hard for you not to be alone on a night like this.'

'A night like this?' I repeated, with conscious innocence.

'I can see, can't I?' she said.

'What do you see? That we're in love with each other?' Noelle asked.

There! She had done it again — twice in three hours she had made that avowal at a moment when I was denied the opportunity of taking action about it.

'Of course,' said Mrs. Kahnet; 'and if I were you I'd slip out by the back entrance and go for a quiet walk together in the squares.'

Never did the voice of the tempter breathe into more willing ears. After all, I was under no parole to remain behind locked doors at the pleasure of any man. Oscar Kahnet was deeply involved at the telephone — the coast was clear — Mrs. Kahnet was slipping a Yale doorkey into my palm, and every pulse in my body and thought in my head and wish in my heart was clamouring to be free.

What harm to play truant for an hour? I looked at Noelle and saw the same light of truancy burning in her eyes as burnt in mine.

'Shall we?' I whispered.

'Dare we?' she whispered.

'Oh, you silly children, run,' whispered the tempter.

14

I shall never forget the thrill of tiptoeing down that long passage, the flight of stairs at the end, and creeping silently through the back door and into the street. A hundred watchers may have seen us come out, but, if so, I was unaware of them. For me, except for Noelle, the world was empty.

Beneath whispering, leafless plane trees we lingered — or drifted by railings where the pavements had been troughed by the slow passage of lovers' feet. Into the divine solitudes of mews we wandered and under the shelter of tall houses whose windows looked down upon us with dumb envy. For who and what could have failed to envy us upon that night of nights?

Twinkling lights that were not the stars that burned for us, the tramping of feet other than our own, voices lifted in song that was not the singing in our hearts, brought us earthward to reality.

I remember standing, an arm about Noelle's shoulders, watching an endless procession of men and women passing by. I remember the black silhouette of the trees against the sapphire of the night sky.

I remember how we had no secret from each other but one, and how, because even one was too many, I stooped and whispered it to her.

'In the garden at Xavier, Noelle, under a millstone. The formula — I hid it there.'

I remember the slow nod she gave me, the smile, the understanding that I had given her all I had to give except the rest of my life. The soldiers' camp-fires under the trees were reflected in her eyes.

How long we stood there I cannot tell. The world of facts had faded out again. Only Noelle — the lights — the sable trees and the dark sapphire of the sky remained.

But as we stood there came a mysterious change. The sapphire reddened and glowed and far away a golden spire rose heavenward.

As though in answer to an order, the marching thou-

sands stopped and gaped toward the east and in the hush that followed a faint rumble like distant thunder echoed in our ears.

‘What is it? What’s happened? What can it be?’

A medley of voices — a gigantic chorus of enquiry.

I heard a man say, ‘Seen nothing like that since the Cuffley Zep was shot down.’

The astonishing radiance lit up the faces of the watchers like the streak of dawn.

Simultaneously, from somewhere behind me and high up, a dozen shots rang out, sharp and precise. I will not swear to it, for so much was happening and so rapidly, but I had an impression of a series of luminous streaks plunging downward into the shadow of the trees. And then, with an angry roar, not a hundred yards away, there leapt up a column of flame lighting the whole neighbourhood with the brilliance of day.

So sudden and unexpected was this phenomenon that not one in a thousand realised what had happened. A gust of wind sent a tongue of flame licking over the heads of those nearest the railings.

‘They are firing the petrol dumps!’ I cried, and tightening my arm round Noelle, tried to steer her through the fringes of the crowd into a side street.

But I was too late. A stampede of terror-stricken mortals swept beyond the entrance to the street and forced us against the railings of a house. The pressure of that mass of blinded humanity was awful, and I remember using my fists in an effort to give breathing space to Noelle. I remember the shrieks of women, men cursing, and the cataracts of blazing spirit that flowed like a stream of lava from the interior of the

petrol dump. Beyond the railings tiny black figures were scattering in all directions.

Anything was better than the hideous pressure to which we were subjected, and, fighting, thrusting, kicking even, I managed to drag Noelle into a current in the crowd bearing westward. But panic was abroad, and a stronger current swept us back into a whirlpool. Somehow, I managed to get Noelle onto my shoulders and with both arms free lammed out to right and left.

A man with a voice like a bull's yelled above the uproar, 'Keep moving one way!'

He must have saved a score of lives, that man. Those who heard formed themselves into a heaving mass that swept like a wave through the terrified multitude. I remember the sense of being lifted up and up, borne on the crest of that wave and thrown like jetsam into the comparative emptiness of a side street. I remember the feel of Noelle's hand in mine, the 'I'm all right' that she gasped, and then, a face over her shoulder, an uplifted arm that carried oblivion descending upon me too swiftly to avoid. The rest is a jumble of stunned impressions. A sickening thud, a woman's cry that whirled away into a spinning silence, and vaguely — so vaguely that I could believe I have invented it — a foreign voice sibilating, 'The man has fainted. He is my friend.'

A sense of being lifted and then sleeping on and on and on — until at last I opened weary eyes and, looking about me, could not recognise the room in which I lay.

BOOK IV

I

OSCAR KAHNET was standing in the open doorway when Noelle, clinging to the railings for support, came in sight. Picking her up like a child, he carried her into the house and laid her on the sofa in the study. It is characteristic that he asked no questions. It is characteristic that she did not faint — nor cry — nor offer excuses. She waved aside the brandy he offered her, and said, slowly:

‘They got him. A blow on the head. A man pushed me back into the crowd. I could do nothing. He was gone when I got back to the place.’

‘Yes,’ said Oscar Kahnet. There was no reproach in his voice. His wife had already heard all he intended to say about our truant escapade. His views had been expressed in two words, ‘Madness — fatal.’

He was surprised that even Noelle had returned.

‘You saw who struck the blow?’

‘I can’t be sure — I think Mario Gualia.’

Oscar Kahnet nodded grimly.

‘We shall be helpless for the next few days,’ he said. ‘The police will have their hands too full — and with the whole country standing still.’

‘They won’t kill him?’ said Noelle, her voice unnaturally steady.

‘If you can be sure it was Gualia, no,’ he said.

Hope burned.

‘Why — why not?’

‘That would be the last thing,’ he said. ‘Those others would kill him — not Gualia — not at any rate until he has learnt what he wants to know.’

‘Then Bob is safe,’ she said. ‘He’ll never speak.’

‘I hope you are right,’ he said, looking at her strangely, and added, ‘But there are ways ——’ He thought better of finishing the sentence and sat at his table biting his knuckles thoughtfully.

‘It was my fault,’ said Noelle. ‘My selfish fault.’

‘Yes,’ he replied, but did not seem to be listening. When next he spoke it was almost to himself.

‘Mario Gualia! Working alone he would hardly succeed in kidnapping any one. Even with luck on his side the job would be too big for him. *Ergo* — others besides himself were concerned? What others? A man held you back in the crowd, you said. H’m! This was no improvisation.’ He picked up the telephone and asked for a number.

‘Savoy Hotel. Mr. Mischa Groffe, please.’

A voice at the other end replied that Mr. Groffe was out.

Oscar Kahnet put his finger on the receiver rest, lifted it again, and asked for another number.

‘Mr. Flèche,’ he said; then after a pause: ‘I don’t care how busy he is. This is Oscar Kahnet.’ Followed a longer pause, then — ‘Flèche? You will have the gentlemen whose names I shall give you followed day and night until further notice. Your men will report their movements to me by telephone hour by hour. Take down Mischa Groffe, Alex Ioneth, Hans Biederoff, Zeni Frambauer, Roberto Tringolore, and Kurd

Icante. Repeat that. Yes. Make your arrangements at once.'

He hung up the receiver and, taking his head in his hands, looked at Noelle through his parted fingers.

'Can you suggest anything else?'

'No — nothing. You think these men were in it?'

'Not in it — but at the back of it. Gualia has not had time to make other friends. Those pirates sustained too heavy a reverse in their bank raid to strike again so soon. But don't fasten too many hopes on what I have done. They are clever, you know — too clever to be pulled down by a few hired sleuths.'

The door opened and Mrs. Kahnet crept into the room. Instinctively she sensed the tragedy that filled it.

'Where — where's Mr. Shaftoe?' she asked.

'I've lost him,' said Noelle. 'I've lost — out there in the crowd — isn't it — careless of me!' Very quietly she began to laugh.

The telephone bell rang and a voice at the other end of the wire in a low monotonous tone enumerated a long list of attacks upon the petrol dumps, tank farms, and reservoirs in all parts of the country.

2

When Dominic Vane set forth from the house in Lancaster Gate upon the chivalrous emprise of paying court to Anne Shaftoe, a great gaiety of disposition bore him company. He felt, and not without reason, that he had been cooped up overlong. The prospect of a seventy-mile drive over night roads at a speed of his own choosing filled his heart with cheerful anticipa-

tion. There was, however, much of interest going on in London that night, and no one will be surprised to learn that on his way to the Savoy Hotel he fell in with adventures of a novel and agreeable kind. At Marble Arch he joined with a band of British Fascisti and in their company was instrumental in breaking up an impromptu revolutionary meeting with which the police had been powerless to cope. In the course of this encounter he captured and bore away the red banner of the opposing forces.

Separated from his companions in the *mêlée*, Dominic continued his journey alone, pausing here and there, as occasion demanded, to remonstrate with any one who incurred his displeasure.

At the Savoy he learnt that his car had been garaged in Savoy Street, a narrow, slanting thoroughfare in the shadow of Waterloo Bridge declining from the Strand to the Embankment. Here he arrived to find a distraught proprietor attempting to discourage a number of strikers from decanting the contents of his petrol reservoir into a drain. The poor fellow was no match for his adversaries and with arms pinioned had the mortification of witnessing the strikers swinging the handle of his Bowser pump.

In the excitement and confusion, Dominic slipped unnoticed into the garage and finding a two-gallon tin of petrol in the back of a car he emptied its contents into a pail. Armed with this he sallied forth and without a word of introduction swilled the whole lot over the heads of the strikers.

'Now, buzz off,' said he, 'or I'll chuck a lighted match among you.'

Being persons of imagination they did not await a second invitation, but scattered severally. Some fled toward the river and others the Strand. One unhappy fellow, who was but mildly saturated, had the misfortune to collide with a man who was lighting a cigarette and himself took fire. The scene excited the interest and admiration of onlookers, who formed a ring about the martyr, and admired the dexterity with which he divested himself of a flaming coat, waistcoat, shirt, and undervest. His subsequent retreat, revealing a not unshapely torso, was in the direction of Bow Street, whither he was conducted by a pair of stalwart constables, one of whom remarked ominously that he would soon know what it was all about making a Guy Fawkes of himself on a night like this.

Dominic, in the mean time, had backed out his car, accepted the gratitude of the garage proprietor, and departed in the direction of the Embankment. Here he arrived at the moment that those mysterious spires of flame rose in the east. In the hush of the trafficless city he heard the roar and also some little popping sounds, reminiscent of gun-fire.

On Blackfriars Bridge he fell in with a convoy of lorries carrying troops and travelling in the same direction under the ægis of four armoured cars. The whole of the eastern sky was by then a cauldron of flame, which seemed to spring from a dozen sources.

The convoy was travelling fast — fast enough for Dominic to avail himself of the companionship it afforded. On the south side of the river, the attitude of the public was less friendly than on the north. Coal, rubbish, and foul epithets were hurled at the convoy as:

it streaked along the narrow roads. Occasionally they were brought to a standstill, and the troops were called upon to turn out and shift some obstacle from the way. At one of these halts a police officer boarded Dominic's car and settled in the seat beside him.

'You on duty with this outfit?' he asked.

'More or less free-lancing,' Dominic replied.

'Good — then I'll commandeer you and the car for this night's work.'

Dominic began to remonstrate, but the officer cut him short brusquely.

'Martial law was declared half an hour ago,' said he. 'You are commandeered under emergency regulations. You've nothing to say.'

Despite this rather harsh introduction, the officer turned out to be very pleasant and informative. As they travelled along, Dominic asked for news and got plenty.

'What's happening over there?'

'Sabotage,' the officer repeated. 'Don't know as you couldn't almost call it barratry.'

'I shouldn't know what you meant if you did,' said Dominic.

'We've been caught napping, that's what it means. They've been up and down the Thames and Mersey, too, in fast motor boats, shelling every petrol tank farm on both banks. There mus' be over twelve million gallons runnin' loose on the water b' now. If the tide was on the flow instead of the ebb, London 'ud be burnt out to-night. There's wires in from Avonmouth, Saltend, the Mersey, all the commercial stations you may say — and most of the Admiralty stations too.

Though I can't call to mind their names straight off.'

Dominic screwed up his forehead. He was a bit of an expert on Naval Tank Farms, having filled at many during the war. 'Devonport — Old Kilpatrick on the Clyde — Killingholme — Pembroke.'

The officer nodded.

Dominic gave an outward breath.

'Phew! Pretty hot,' said he.

'Damn sight too hot,' was the answer. 'If you ask my opinion, these chaps'll be able to dictate any terms they fancy by the end of the week.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Dominic, who did not understand the meaning of the word pessimism.

'But I do believe it. Ask yourself. With the whole country paralysed — starve us out in a week, they will.'

At that moment Dominic Vane had a sudden idea — so sudden that he applied the brakes with such violence as nearly to send his passenger through the wind-screen.

'Officer, old boy,' he explained, 'terribly sorry, but I've got to turn you out. I'm going back — frightfully important.'

'If you don't follow that convoy double-quick, I'm going to ask why,' was the ominous rejoinder.

'I'm telling you why, you ass,' said Dominic hotly. 'I've thought of a way to save England.'

'You are not going to save it in this car and you are not going to save it now,' the officer replied, and, with dexterity which would have reflected credit upon Tom Mix, he whipped out an automatic and dug it into Dominic's ribs.

The officer was no Hercules, but he possessed a pair of indigo eyes — a colour which, on more occasions than one, Dominic had learnt to regard as dangerous. Men with indigo eyes will shoot unhesitatingly in a good cause, just as men with very pale blue eyes will as unhesitatingly shoot in an evil cause. In the circumstances Dominic was pretty sure that the officer regarded the present cause of sufficient worth to justify any extreme, and with an angry exclamation he engaged first speed and set off in pursuit of the convoy.

The nearest point to London at which petrol storage on a large scale is allowed by the authorities is some thirty miles, but long before they reached this point, from an eminence up which the convoy mounted a panorama at once unique, splendid, and appalling was stretched out before their eyes.

3

On both banks of the river jagged pillars of flame rent the sky. From the great reservoirs, split by incendiary shells, cascades of burning spirit poured down the banks into the river, where with hungry swiftness it spread over the surface, gorging its fiery appetite upon ships and barges and multitudinous small craft that rode at anchor. Too much has been written in the papers about that weird and terrible spectacle to call for more than the sketchiest account of it in these pages. In the ardour of their cause, the strikers had, with a vengeance, set the Thames afire. The Medway, also, had become a river of flame and destruction. Whether those who had committed this outrage even vaguely envisaged the disastrous consequences of their

act upon life and property will not be known. The motor boat which, starting from Chatham, swept down the Medway shelling the tank farms on either bank came into collision with the London-Ostend Steam Packet off Port Victoria and sank with all hands. Of the three others which started simultaneously from Tilbury and Gravesend, two were sunk by a torpedo destroyer, and the third, taking fright and doubling back upstream, ran into a welter of flame pouring from the tanks at Thames Haven and was burnt like a moth in a candle.

Before that fiery efflux, which, like a devouring monster ran seaward with the ebb, great liners turned tail and fled. Anything that had an engine that would turn, steam that would press, a sail that would fill, joined in the *sauve qui peut* for open sea. It was the ebb tide that saved London from destruction that night, yet even with that mercy of Providence the damage done was irreparable.

In some cases, notably at the Admiralty storage depots of Killingholme on the east coast and Pembroke on the west, the raiders were not so successful, but even so they did enormous damage. At Devonport the tanks went up sky high and from Avonmouth a complete loss of supplies was recorded. During that night of terror and treachery reports by telephone and telegram of outrages, great and small, against garages, filling stations, road tank wagons, and Scammells poured into the Home Office in a ceaseless stream. By noon the following day the most enlightened statisticians were unable to forecast how much motor spirit was left in England.

With assassins' cunning, the blow had been struck in the dark. Millions of tons of the vital unprotected and unprotectable commodity was squandered and swilled and destroyed in less than three hours.

By ten o'clock next morning every city and town and many villages throughout the country were placarded with notices, stating, with a baldness that admitted of no misunderstanding, that any person found in the act of destroying or damaging any petrol plant, filling station, road tank wagon, or reservoir would be shot without trial. But the warning came too late. The damage was done — the power, the force, the energy which was to have sustained the country in her hour of need had vanished beneath a pall of smoke. A great nation trembled on the brink of paralysis.

4

When Mario Gualia hit me on the head his action was inspired by the liveliest enthusiasm. Hitherto, in the matter of blows, he had been the target and his sensations must have been delightful when the opportunity was presented to reverse the order. The weapon he used was a life-preserver, although why it should be called that, having regard to its lethal properties, I have never divined. It was of that kind, common in France, which is sheathed in the hollows of an ordinary walking-cane. Attached to the handle of the cane is a short coil spring with a rod of heavier metal at the end. As a weapon it is swift to use, handy and effective. But for the felt hat I was wearing the blow he struck would have cracked my skull like an egg.

I have never discovered who were his confederates,

and I do not anticipate that they will come forward and enlighten me. I learn, however, that they numbered four. One was occupied in keeping Noelle away, and the rest, with Mario Gualia in charge, picked me up and bore me to a car which must have been waiting at no great distance from the spot. Scores of people were injured or had fainted during the panic consequent upon the firing of the petrol dump and I do not suppose we excited much attention. But there was at least one interested spectator; of this I am confident, as it is the only explanation for Mr. James Warrinder's discovery of the house to which my captors bore me. Whether he rode on the back of the car that took me there or followed in a car of his own, I have no idea. He had already proved himself a gentleman of resource and sagacity, and it is to his credit that he followed the scent so closely.

As to what happened to me from then until the time when I recovered consciousness, I have no exact information. I awoke, as I have said, in a strange room. The windows were shuttered, barred, and padlocked. A single electric bulb of small candle-power burned dimly in the ceiling. As my mind cleared and my eyes became used to the light, I saw my clothes, with the linings of the pockets projecting, scattered on the floor. The contents of these pockets — and Heaven knows they must have been disappointing enough to any searcher — had been lumped together on a chair: a few letters and notes, some small change, a bunch of keys, a paper packet of cigarettes, a Dunhill lighter, and an aspirin bottle.

Moving my head was agony — for inside pistons

were driving, valves opening, and wheels spinning. From the pain, the aspirin offered some surcease. Laboriously I rolled over, groped for the bottle, and unscrewed the metal cap. It was the queer, unmistakable smell of the contents that cleared my mind from its daze and informed me that it was not a sedative the bottle contained, but that extra half-ounce of MW-XX.3 which had been left over from my experiment in the cellar. In my present predicament the stuff was valueless, but, in a manner that was almost furtive, I hid it beneath my pillow and made an effort to think.

Like shadowy forms emerging from a mist, the events of the evening began to take shape. Again the eruption of fire rose before my eyes, again I felt the suffocating pressure of the stampeding masses, again I felt Noelle's hand in mine, and again I saw the face over her shoulder and the descending arm.

With a stifled cry I sat up in bed and looked at my wrist watch. The hands registered a few minutes after eight. I knew the habits of my watch and knew that thirty-three hours was its longest non-stop run. I had last wound it on the evening before we left Xavier. That the watch was still going argued that I could not have been unconscious for more than about nine hours, and, although no apparent benefit arose from the fact, I cannot attempt to explain the satisfaction this knowledge gave me. Rewinding the watch and hugging the bottle of MW-XX.3, I fell into a natural sleep.

I was awakened by a low murmur of voices and, opening my eyes, I saw Jura Gualia, accompanied by a tall, thin man who wore a white silk handkerchief over

the lower half of his face, enter the room. Seeing I was conscious, Jura Gualia gave a cry of relief and ran toward me.

'Hush, dear, don't talk,' she said. 'I've brought the doctor to see you.'

Sick as I was, I could not refrain from replying, 'Thanks, darling ——'

The doctor, whom I suspect to have been young, inexperienced, and exceedingly nervous, ran cool but trembling fingers over my head.

'A temporary concussion,' he said, 'nothing serious. A slight contusion over the parietal, but that will very soon heal. No fever — pulse remarkably steady. I should keep him quiet — no visitors — light diet. A little fish, perhaps, tapioca pudding.'

The banality of this diagnosis, coming as it did from behind a mask, struck me as touching the very pinnacles of fun.

'As it isn't catching, why not remove the respirator?' I suggested.

At this he betrayed the liveliest alarm and backed away from the bed.

'I have done all I can,' said he. 'I will leave a prescription for a draught. The whole affair is most unprofessional.'

With that he beat a hurried retreat and entered into conversation with some one on the landing, the sound of their voices dying away as they descended the stairs.

Jura Gualia looked at me with appealing tenderness.

'I insisted on a doctor — insisted,' she said. 'You

will understand how difficult it was — in the circumstances.'

'What are the circumstances?' I demanded, refreshing myself from a glass of soda water she had put beside me.

'Difficult — so very difficult,' said she, 'as is too often the case when friendship and business clash.'

'The business I understand — the friendship is not so clear,' said I.

An expression of surprise came over her face.

'Is it possible,' said she, 'that you are not aware that Mario rescued you last night — saved your life from men who would certainly have killed you?'

'Madame Gualia,' said I, 'if you knew the pain I was suffering in my head, you would resist, I am sure, any temptation to make me laugh.'

'I suppose you saw the little fool?' she said.

'Had I been fated to die,' I replied, 'his face would have provided my last memory of earth.'

It was evident that she was put out at my assailant's failure to conceal his identity, and while she was off her guard I put the question uppermost in my mind.

'I wonder you did not arrange to kidnap Noelle at the same time.'

'We hardly expected you would be mad enough to venture out.'

The reply told me what I wanted to know. Noelle was safe. I heaved a sigh of relief and shut my eyes.

'After all,' she continued, 'Noelle could not help us. You were the one we wanted, since by your own confession you carry the secret of my father's invention in your head.'

'I imagine,' I replied, 'the blow your husband struck me was dictated by a desire to jog my memory.'

She gave a half-smile, but instantly became grave.

'I hope it will serve to do so,' she said.

'It is much more likely to make me forget all about it,' I replied.

She drew up a chair, sat beside me, and took one of my wrists in her hands.

'Listen,' she said, 'you are in love with Noelle. She is my sister and I want to be your friend. But there are others who do not share that wish. You are in their power — utterly. Consent now. Write the formula of MW-XX.3 on this sheet of paper and you are free to go. In return, I promise that both you and Noelle shall have a fair share of the profits.'

'Tell me more,' said I.

'I will tell you everything. Last night attacks were made upon petrol dumps all over the British Isles. It was done so cleverly and secretly that it is said, this morning, that five sixths of the total reserves have been destroyed. With the extra burden cast by the strike on motor transports, there is not enough left to last for more than a few hours. By noon to-morrow the country will be standing still.' She stopped dramatically, her eyes dancing with excitement. 'Don't you see what this means?'

'Famine,' said I.

'Fortune,' she replied, 'instant fortune, for any one who can put a petroleum substitute on the market at a few hours' notice. We might wait a hundred years and never again have such a chance as this.'

Much as I disliked and distrusted Jura Gualia, I

could not escape capturing some of her enthusiasm. What she claimed was true, for, independent of any financial consideration, here, indeed, was the golden opportunity to justify Michael Wilbur's invention. Cleverly, secretly, expeditiously handled, MW-XX.3 might become an instrument for national salvation.

With an effort that hurt most damnably, I sat up in bed.

'Very good,' I said, 'send for a car and have me driven to the Home Office straightaway.'

'Private cars were forbidden by order an hour ago.'

'Then I must make shift to walk.'

'But this is a private, not a Government matter.'

'Since it affects the whole nation,' said I, 'I don't agree.'

Jura's grip tightened on my wrist.

'You are behaving like a fool,' she said. 'Do you think we went to the trouble of bringing you here to let you walk out as you please?'

'And do you think you stand an earthly chance of profiting by your father's invention unless you let me walk out?' I retorted.

Her eyes narrowed unpleasantly.

'There are men in this house who think they can persuade you to change your mind about that.'

'Bring 'em up,' said I; 'the sooner they learn their mistake the better.'

With the knowledge in Noelle's possession of where I had hidden her father's original formula and with Dominic Vane acquainted with the key figures of the code, the need for me to speak had vanished. It was up to Noelle and Noelle alone to decide whether or no to use

MW-XX.3 as a weapon to fight the strike and make the wheels of the country go round.

My responsibility was at an end, and with this realization I stretched out my arms and laughed.

I was still laughing when Mario Gualia and Mischa Groffe, looking like a pair of Spanish inquisitors, came silently into the room.

5

When, a little before dawn of the same day Mrs. Kahnet descended to her husband's study, urged by an inward and compelling desire to minister to some one, she found him still seated at his writing-table. Before him were a tin of sweet biscuits, some apples, and a paper upon which was a mass of pencilled statistics.

To justify the intrusion, Mrs. Kahnet brought with her a large cup of tea. Putting it on the table without a word, she turned to retire when his voice recalled her.

'Is that child asleep?'

She shook her head.

'She is at the window — watching the crowd gathering at the gates of the park.'

He frowned.

'A crowd is there? What kind of crowd?'

'Nasty-looking people,' said Mrs. Kahnet. 'I didn't know there were such nasty people in England.'

'They will try to prevent the convoys going out,' he said, and added, 'How tiresome! You saw no fire engines?'

'Several — an hour ago. They went into the park.'

Oscar Kahnet nodded. 'They had the sense to take

my advice,' said he. His wife looked bewildered. 'But the fire is out, Oscar, although in the east ——'

'Yes, yes,' he said, and waved a hand to silence her.

The telephone bell rang. He listened, nodded, and hung up the receiver.

'Mischa Groffe has not returned. He has been out all night,' said he.

Neither the news nor the name had any significance for Mrs. Kahnet. It was on the general principle that it is improper for a man to be out all night that she clicked her tongue reprovingly.

'Tch! Tch!'

'Shocking, isn't it?' said he, and nodded at the telephone. 'Stay here awhile and take the messages.'

He went out and, climbing the stairs, knocked gently at his wife's door. A small dry voice answered, 'Come in.'

Noelle was standing by the window, her figure silhouetted against the pale opal sky. The hum of engines and words of command were faintly audible.

'One of the convoys is going out,' she said.

'Milk,' he replied.

'Will they get through? Look at all the people.'

The great mass of men gathered before the gates of the park was not the kind of crowd to be looked for in that polite locality. The very dregs of Notting-Hill were among them. A cavalry officer rode up to the gates on the inside and gestured to the crowd to make way. His action was greeted with hoots, yells, and cat-calls. Bits of rubbish, a few stones, and a bottle were thrown. The officer on the horse sat still as a statue. He held up his hand for silence and miraculously was

given a hearing. Through the open window floated the words, 'I give you thirty seconds to stand clear.'

A fresh tumult broke loose. The officer pulled back the cuff of his sleeve and looked at his wrist watch unconcernedly. Presently he dropped his arm and put his horse at the low railings that divide the roadway from the Row and vanished behind a canvas screen which had been erected during the night. He had scarcely disappeared when from beneath the screen appeared the nozzles of many hose pipes. A dozen jets of water were directed into and across the watchers. Before that sudden and inexhaustible flow the crowd, with screams of surprise, scattered like hens at the approach of a car.

'Soak it into 'em, boys, slosh 'em up good and hearty!' shouted the officer in charge.

The knights of the hose needed no second invitation and, emerging from their temporary screen, shortened the range and increasing the elevation swamped the flying multitude with tons of driven water. In the height of the confusion, the gates were thrown open and the convoy went through.

'Listen,' said Noelle. 'All night long I have been watching those fires in the east and thinking — thinking. If things are as bad as they seem — there's my father's invention — isn't this the time to use it?'

For fully five seconds he looked at her fixedly. Then very slowly he nodded.

'You're right,' he said, 'although I've struggled to convince myself that not even now were we justified. But you *are* right, for the very argument of human obligation which prevailed on you to keep silence now

commands us to speak. For fourteen years that stuff has followed me like a shadow, and it has overtaken me at last.' He rose and paced the room. 'You have the formula?'

Noelle shook her head.

'I know where it can be found.'

'The formula is in code. You know the key-word?'

'No, but Dominic knows.'

'Dominic? That scatter-brained fellow who left us last night?'

'He went to Xavier. The formula is there — hidden in the garden.'

Oscar Kahnet screwed up his forehead and picked up the telephone instrument from beside his wife's bed.

'Let me see, the number was——? Ah, yes. Trunks, please. What's that? Nonsense, man. Government service. Give me trunks at once. Supervisor, then?'

The remarks he addressed to the supervisor were like a rattle of musketry. A moment later in a calmer tone he was speaking to the trunks operator.

'This is Hyde 9191. Subscriber, Oscar Kahnet. I want Duncton one o. Yes, Duncton in Sussex. I will not hang up. Priority call. Put me through straight.'

Two minutes later, a woman's voice, faint but clear, answered, 'Yes, who is it?'

'Hold,' said Oscar Kahnet, and handed the instrument to Noelle.

'Is that you, Anne? It's Noelle here. I want to speak to Dominic. What? Not there? But he started at ten o'clock last night.' Noelle turned to Oscar Kahnet. 'He hasn't arrived.'

'That man will ruin the country yet,' said he.

'Anne,' said Noelle, 'your father, then. It's frightfully urgent.'

For half a minute there was silence and a faint record on the line of a voice calling, 'Father — Father.'

Then old Shaftoe saying, 'Yes, my dear, what is it?'

'Mr. Shaftoe — I want — hullo — HULLO —'

The line had gone dead.

Noelle rattled the receiver rest.

'Hullo, Hyde Park,' said a new voice. 'Midhurst speaking.'

'Put me back to Duncton one o.'

'Sorry, miss,' said the voice. 'All the south lines have been cut. We were warned that something ——'

The sentence ended abruptly in a click and a drone.

'They've cut the lines,' said Noelle, and looked at Oscar Kahnet with the pallor of a passionate agitation on her cheeks.

Oscar Kahnet took the telephone and rattled the receiver rest.

'Supervisor at once.'

Followed a rafale of question and answer, at the end of which he put down the instrument with the nearest approach to anger Noelle had seen him display.

'Half the trunk lines are down already,' he said. 'We were just too late.'

With a light of determination in her eyes, Noelle came to her feet. 'I'll go to Xavier,' she said.

'You? How? Every car has been commandeered. I might get a Government permit — if we wait.'

'I can ride a motor bike.'

Motor cycles had not yet been included in the restriction order.

He shook his head. 'The roads may not be safe. I will get onto the Home Office. They will issue a car and an escort.'

'No, no, no!' cried Noelle, and stamped her foot. 'I go alone or no one goes. Do you think it's bearable for me to stay here idle with Bob in the hands of these men? I'm going alone, I tell you — and now. You will have plenty to do finding Dominic. You must scour the country for him. You have the list of chemicals Bob gave you when he rang up from Xavier. Get all you can — tons — all there is of them.' She paused for breath and went on: 'If I am not back by to-morrow night, you can send others. Tell them to look under the millstone — by the sundial in the back garden of Xavier. Now, a motor bike, please, at once.'

Enquiry proved that the second footman had a motor bicycle that he was most reluctant to lend, and Mrs. Kahnet had some riding-breeches that she was very willing to lend.

The footman sold the motor cycle in a strong market, Oscar Kahnet paying double its original purchase price.

Said Mrs. Kahnet as Noelle stamped on the self-starter and made the engine buzz:

'A ride down to the country will do you all the good in the world.'

Without a word of farewell, Noelle vanished in a cloud of smoke from the exhaust.

6

When at an early hour the same morning, the Home Office rang up Bow Street Police Station with instructions that one Robert Shaftoe was to be brought to Whitehall under escort, and immediately, the consternation among the officials was profound.

'But neither of the two gentlemen was detained, sir,' an inspector replied. 'The chaps that pulled off the bank raid was questioned and one of 'em gave away that they was members of a gang of Continental crooks.'

The Home Secretary in the mean time had taken the telephone and cut these disclosures short in a peremptory and pyrotechnic manner. To digest his enquiry into civil language produced a question upon what authority we had been released.

'No orders was given to detain 'em, sir.'

'They are to be brought here within the hour. You have their addresses?'

'Oh, we're sure to have the addresses, sir,' replied the inspector, but, witnessing three of his colleagues in the act of shaking their heads, he had the mortification of contradicting himself. 'We don't seem to have got the addresses, after all.'

There followed a silence on the wire of a nature so profound and nerve-shattering that the inspector's cheeks blanched beneath their tan. The silence was followed by an eruption of criticism even more devastating in its consequences.

'For Heaven's sake,' said the inspector to a brother in blue, 'take a turn on here. I can't stand no more of it.'

As the duty in question only involved listening, the transposition was effected without exciting notice. At the conclusion the second inspector said, 'Very good, sir — at once, sir,' hung up the receiver, and leaned against the wall for support.

'Putting joking on one side,' said he, when he had recovered a measure of his composure, 'not even in the army did I 'ear swearin' to match it. He said if we had to turn out five hundred men those two chaps 'ave got to be in Whitehall to-day.'

Inspector number one nodded grimly. 'Just a nice job for a day like this,' said he. 'What with special guards to find for every blinking thing, we can do with a bit extra.'

But, protest notwithstanding, the activities which ensued were conducted with an enthusiasm and despatch for which it would be hard to find a rival.

Oscar Kahnet was on a toll call to Thames Haven when the police cut in on priority.

'I want to know the whereabouts of Robert Shaf-toe.'

'So do I,' was the dangerously sweet rejoinder.

'Know anything about him?'

'Only that he was kidnapped outside my house at eleven o'clock last night.'

'Oh, for Gawd's sake!' said the voice. Then, 'There was a gentleman with him?'

'There was. He left here to get his car from the Savoy Hotel about an hour earlier. He was to have driven to Sussex. He hasn't arrived and hasn't been heard of since.'

'Do you know where I could find him?'

'No. But I'll pay five hundred pounds to the man who does.'

'You will?' was the surprised rejoinder. 'The Home Secretary says he's got to be found — that both of 'em have — if the whole force does nothing else but look for 'em.'

'That's the first good news I've had in the last twelve hours,' said Oscar Kahnet, as he hung up the receiver.

While the police supply the public with a rich source of humour, they also supply the finest organisation of its kind in the world. If the Big Five themselves were not enlisted in the job of searching for Dominic and me, men of an eminence not less than six, seven, or eight gave to the matter their devoted and immediate attention. Detective Inspector Reskey of Scotland Yard, in company with some minor lights, set forth on the trail of Dominic. He began operations at the Savoy Hotel, where, being a man of imagination, he did not satisfy himself with enquiries as to where the car had been garaged, but put some searching questions as to Dominic's general habits and demeanour. These were answered by one of the reception staff who had known Dominic since before the war.

'Without wishing to suggest that Mr. Vane was intoxicated,' said he, 'he was in a very peculiar mood. He had been fighting a good deal, but I think I am justified in saying not enough to satisfy him.'

'Did he seem to you in the sort of mood to drive down to Sussex to talk to a girl?' Reskey demanded, for he also had been in communication with Oscar Kahnet.

The reception clerk scratched his chin.

'Possibly he would — that is, if he got done scrap-ping here in time to allow of it.'

Reskey nodded appreciatively.

'You've some sense,' he said. 'Now where's this garage?'

He was told and proceeded to Savoy Street forth-with.

The garage proprietor was eloquent, not to say lyrical on the subject of Dominic.

'Never saw the match of him,' he said. 'Swilled the juice over those chaps, he did, and stood there — on his toes — laughing at 'em. Plucky!' He put a period to his eulogy by sucking his teeth sharply.

'Hmph!' said Reskey. 'What sort of car?'

'Open Bentley — sports — special order, I should say — kind of canoe body — red panels — silver bon-net and black wings. I got the number here. LD. 3407.'

'What time did he leave here?'

'Couldn't say that, but he turned down toward the Embankment just as them fires started over east.'

Reskey put his thumbs together and thought.

'Sure of that?'

'Certain.'

'Hm! Now — in your opinion — would that gentleman, seeing those fires in the east, drive off west?'

The garage proprietor scouted the idea.

'He couldn't do it — not that gentleman. He'd just 'ave to find out what it was all about.'

Reskey looked at the time. It was nine forty-five. As the police patrolling the city were doing a twelve-

hour shift by emergency orders, the men who were on duty the preceding evening would not yet have been relieved. Nodding to the garage proprietor, Reskey entered his car and drove down Savoy Street to the river.

The constables questioned on the Embankment could offer him no exact information, but at the corner of Blackfriars Bridge a young constable was sure he had seen a car answering to Reskey's description.

'It linked up behind the big convoy,' he said. 'A Bentley it was, with a special body. The gentleman driving was chucking cigarettes to the chaps riding on the tail board of the last lorry.'

That was good enough for Reskey and, complimenting the constable upon his powers of observation, he pursued with high hopes the course taken by the convoy overnight. At a police station in Rotherhithe he paused to make fresh enquiries, and was rewarded with the information that Inspector Harris, of the Rotherhithe Division, had boarded and commandeered just such a car as the one he sought. The inspector, he learned, had been detailed for special duty at Gravesend, and thither Reskey proceeded with all the speed he could command.

At Gravesend he met with a disappointment, for the convoy had been split up and despatched to various destinations to aid in the work of fighting the flames. Of Harris and the car he could ascertain nothing, and he continued his journey eastward with declining spirits.

Valuable time had already been lost, nor was there any reason to suppose that his chances of finding the

truant car were favourable, but, as he was in the act of taking a blind corner rather wide, he heard the roar of an approaching engine and drew over to the left only just in time to avoid a collision.

The onrushing car went at the corner full bore, applied the brakes, dry skidded, and went recklessly on. In that brief instant Reskey recognised his quarry, let go a yell, and swung round his own car in pursuit.

The road was moderately wide and he made the turn without reversing, but it took time, and the Bentley was leading by three hundred yards when he rounded the bend and came into the straight beyond.

Dominic Vane had neither heeded the yell nor the gesture that accompanied it. All night and part of the day he had been trying to escape and was in no mood to invite recapture. That Dominic had succeeded in effecting his freedom was due to the fact that the officer had misjudged the spirit and gall of his captive. He was convinced that by leaving Dominic in the car, in a pair of handcuffs, he had done all that was necessary to confine his activities.

'Stop there,' he had said at the entrance to a modest coffee-house, 'and p'r'aps I'll bring you a cup o' something.' So saying he departed.

Dominic Vane had no previous experience of driving a Bentley in handcuffs, but that did not discourage him from making the attempt. In an extremity a gear lever can be operated by foot. His departure was sudden and spectacular. Animated by a spirit of derision, he yelled farewell and waved his manacled hands at the amazed inspector, who emerged from the coffee-house too late to prevent his flight.

The sight of the Bentley sensibly gaining every instant upon the stately vehicle which pursued it provided Reskey with one of the most galling experiences in his career. Scotland Yard, in company with many other national institutions, makes no feature of supporting home industries. The car with which Reskey had been provided was of French manufacture, sturdy, reliable, and capable of a maximum speed of thirty-nine miles per hour. At the pace set by the Bentley, it was losing half a mile in the mile. Their one chance of success reposed in the possibility of obstacles ahead, and, with this hope to sustain him, Reskey held on grimly in the wake of a quarry that was already out of sight. Addressing his companions, he bade them, should the opportunity present itself, shoot at the tyres and the tank.

‘It doesn’t matter how, but we’ve got to get that chap.’

In Gravesend a number of wharfingers and stevedores were holding a meeting in the middle of the road, which dissolved itself onto the pavement as Dominic went through. It reassembled in time for a second, if rather less urgent, dissolution at the approach of the Reskey equipage. Symbolic of the genesis of the strike, lumps of coal were thrown with passionate profusion, and Sergeant Waygood, who occupied one of the back seats, suffered the indignity of having the crown of his bowler hat severed from the brim. Thus, with some outward pretensions of comedy, the chase developed along the Dartford Road.

Hitherto Fortune had favoured Dominic Vane, and it was not until he reached the outskirts of Dartford that she frowned upon him.

Along the narrow road and occupying most of its surface came a brigade of the Royal Horse Artillery. What their objective might be Dominic had no notion, but he was well aware that, although by liberal use of the imperative Klaxon one might successfully chase a handful of insurgent wharfingers up side streets and into the areas of private houses, the chance of routing a brigade of artillery by a similar expedient was unfavourable.

Dominic had seen the green police permit on the windscreen of Reskey's car, and had further seen, in the mirror, the celerity with which they had swung round in pursuit of him. There was not a doubt in his mind that he was being chased, and, having given his pursuers so good a lead, he was unwilling to sacrifice it. But here was a situation that offered no alternative. An officer beckoned him to pull in to the kerb, and, realising the futility of argument, he had no choice but to obey.

For an interminable period men and guns flowed by at a rate of progression tormenting to a man of impatient spirit. To Dominic, who sat with his manacled wrists buried between his knees, there seemed enough guns to demolish a continent. He was beginning to despair of the procession ever coming to an end, when, from way behind him at the head of the column, he heard an order to close in on the left. The order repeated by N.C.O.'s came trickling down the line. Simultaneously he heard the purr of an engine and glancing over his shoulder saw that the police car was barely seventy-five yards to the rear. In less than a quarter of a minute he knew he must be overtaken.

Already a voice was shouting a lusty command to stand and surrender. In an effort to drown the words, Dominic brought his hands down on the knob of the Klaxon and, kicking in the gear, started off as fast as he dared along the widening avenue before him. To his immense relief he saw that the end of the column was in sight. He had but to pass it and safety was assured, but, although the gunners had pulled over to the left, there was not space enough to risk a turn of speed. The police car, taking advantage of the space cleared by Dominic, was gaining rapidly, its passengers shouting injunctions to all and sundry, which even the screech of Dominic's Klaxon was unable to overwhelm.

Not more than twenty yards separated the two cars when Dominic passed the end of the column, tripped into second gear with his toe, and trod on the gas. Realising that Fate was against him, Reskey drew his automatic and opened fire. His marksmanship, on account of a not unnatural agitation, was not of the best, in fact, beyond chipping the beading of the petrol tank, he emptied his magazine in vain. Equally unsuccessful was Sergeant Waygood, he of the crownless bowler, who discharged six chambers with the sole result that he drilled a neat round hole through the wind-screen and plugged the radiator of their own car.

With petrol flowing in a thin stream from Dominic's tank and a spout of steam and boiling water leaping skyward from the damaged radiator, the chase proceeded. But now success was no longer determined by the factor of speed, but by a question of spirit and water. Which would empty itself first — Dominic's

tank or Reskey's already depleted radiator? It had become a race to a standstill and grimly they settled down to fight it out.

Dominic had gained perhaps a quarter of a mile when the first hiss, pop, and stutter bore testimony of what was amiss.

The engine flurried uncertainly, banged twice, worried on for a few revolutions, then, propelled by the energy of the car, turned in silence. With the liveliest oath Dominic Vane kicked the gear lever into neutral and, looking to right and left for an avenue of escape, let the car free-wheel down a gentle incline before him.

The police, rounding a bend in the road, four hundred yards to the rear, sighted Dominic and let go a yell of triumph which synchronised with the vaporisation of the final drop of water in the radiator. But here was no time for mechanical niceties. With his mouth shut like a trap, Reskey set out to establish a speed record for the car. He would probably have succeeded, too, had not his engine, denied the cooling influences of water, engendered such infernal heats within that the crankshaft bearings melted like wax. The heaving pistons, expanding against the unlubricated walls of the cylinders, seized with one accord. But Reskey did not stop to mourn over that tortured and calamitous piece of machinery which had borne him so far and so faithfully. With a shout to the rest to follow, he leapt to the road and dusted down the slope like a rabbit.

In the reflecting mirror Dominic saw the charge of his adversaries, and, risking all in a final cast, heaved the wheel over and let his car roll down a narrow steep

alley toward the river. At the foot of the alley was a wooden jetty, to which was moored a small rowboat. To apply the side brake was beyond the power of his manacled hands, but, slowing down with the foot brake, he let the Bentley bump against a wooden bollard.

By the time the breathless and perspiring policemen had reached the jetty, Dominic Vane, with an action singularly suggestive of a Pekinese dog begging, was plying a pair of oars fifty yards from the shore.

7

Looking, as I have said, like a pair of Spanish inquisitors, Mischa Groffe and Mario Gualia entered the room in which I was confined. The expression upon Groffe's face was the apotheosis of gravity. It should, I felt, have been perpetuated in some form to act as a guide for the proper facial deportment of hangmen and executioners.

In Mario Gualia, there was no such evidence of seriousness. His sleek and handsome features were illuminated with an expression of eager anticipation. Prophetically, he carried over his neck and shoulders a coil of rope. In his coat pocket was a blow lamp and in his right hand a bag of tools taken from a motor car. Appointed with this equipment, it seemed reasonable to suppose he intended to embark upon the joyous enterprise of overhauling me.

With their arrival the colour died from Jura Gualia's cheeks. Mario, smiling very damnably, busied himself with his blow lamp and spread out his tools upon the floor. Mischa Groffe said nothing at all, but regarded me with the concentrated gaze of a man wrestling with

a difficult problem. His brows were knit, his lips drawn back, and he held a cigar between a set of suspiciously white teeth. That silent scrutiny provided not the least of my discomforts. Taken in conjunction with the soft roar of the blow lamp, it was terrifying. Unless some one spoke, I felt I should scream, but as no one seemed disposed to oblige, I myself opened the ball, with what I now conceive to have been one of the most fatuous remarks ever made.

'What are we waiting for?'

Mischa Groffe started visibly and his expression relaxed.

'The formula of MW-XX.3, of course,' said he, and added, 'Didn't you know?'

This brief exchange revived my spirits, and, taking my courage in both hands, I replied:

'I guessed it was that, but as I don't mean to give it to you, it is a pity to let that little wop waste petrol in a blow lamp.'

'Very soon we shall know if it is waste,' said Mario, and the smile which accompanied the remark made me hate him worse than ever.

He picked up the rope and began to coil it lovingly. I noticed it was looped at one end like a lasso.

'Oh, go,' said I, 'and hang yourself.'

'Wait,' said Mischa Groffe, with a gesture of command, and, drawing up a chair, seated himself beside the bed. 'You have placed us, Shaftoe, in an unfortunate position.'

'My own,' I retorted, 'is not much to boast about.'

'With a criminal disregard of the wishes of the late Michael Wilbur and of his elder daughter, Madame

Gualia, you have taken upon yourself to withhold a secret which it is her right to know.'

'That's a matter of opinion,' said I.

But again he held up his hand.

'The law could compel you to reveal that secret, Shaftoe, but we have not time to wait for the law. A national crisis has arisen which makes the revelation of this secret of the utmost importance. Let me add that the mulishness of a single individual will not be allowed to interfere with our plans.' His arm flowed out in the direction of the blow lamp.

'You dirty little Armenian,' I said. 'Pick up your carpets and get out before ——'

But I did not finish the sentence. With an accuracy that was uncanny he flicked the ash of his cigar into one of my eyes.

In the sudden blinding pain that followed, I cannot say whether I tried to hit him or not. Perhaps a mere reflex action sent my left arm flying out in a wide half-circle. It was sheer ill luck that his face was in the way of it. My knuckles caught him full in the mouth and smashed as nice a piece of dental bridge work as a man could desire. With my unaffected eye I had a glimpse of my horrified persecutor delivering up a quantity of fractured porcelain and vulcanite to an accompaniment of inarticulate sounds peculiar to the toothless. Stamping with fury, he waded up and down the room, calling Heaven to advise him how, with the whole country standing on its head, he was to equip himself with a new set. Without waiting for a celestial answer, he plunged from the room, hand over mouth, in an ecstasy of savage and impotent rage.

If Mario Gualia had been an effective lieutenant, he would have chosen this moment to rope me. But denied the support of his leader, he declined into a state of nerves which, had I been in full possession of my faculties, would have left him at my mercy. Wrenching his fancy pistol from his pocket, he backed into a corner of the room and presented it at my head with an aim so uncertain as almost to ensure my immunity from danger.

With his pistol arm extended and his teeth bared, he yelled lustily to Jura to hit me with something, but, since he did not specify with what, she wisely refrained from doing so. Her sole contribution can hardly be said to have strengthened their position. With an inflection positively venomous, she urged him to put away the pistol and not behave like a fool.

'Put it away before it goes off and hurts some one, you fool.'

All the time I was expecting the door to be flung open and men to rush in and overpower me. That none came sent my hopes soaring high. Was it possible that Gualia and Groffe were the only men concerned in the enterprise of extracting the secret from me? The more I thought of it the more reasonable it seemed to suppose so. It is one thing to hire a few toughs to jolly a man in a crowd and heave him into a car, but it is not so easy, at a few hours' notice, to engage the services of professional torturers.

If I had had my wits about me, I would have jumped from my bed and made a break for freedom. Had I done so, I believe I should have had a fair chance of success. But my head was still muzzy from the whack

I had had, one eye was temporarily out of commission, I had lost my temper, and my trousers were on the floor. Of all the deterrents I believe the latter was the strongest. I simply could not see myself doing the hundred down whatever the street was, in nothing but a suit of underwear. I see now that I might have been mistaken for an enthusiastic athlete, but that view of the case did not present itself to me until too late.

At the time I was content to know that by a miracle of good fortune I had succeeded temporarily in putting my adversaries out of action. This belief was supported by the banging of the front door and the sound of footsteps hastening up the street. I could not be sure, but I was pretty certain that Mischa Groffe had set off in search of running repairs to his dental equipment. It transpired, as will be shown later, that I was right.

Mario Gualia and his wife heard the slamming of the front door and, with a common impulse, which I feel sure was all too rare in their marital relations, they fled the room and turned the key in the lock. In his flight Mario had grabbed the blow lamp from the floor and, from a shriek of feminine abuse launched a second later, I fear that he must have misdirected the flame as together they descended the stairs. He did not apologise, but shouted excitedly, 'Since the pig smashed my ruby nothing goes right.'

Jura's reply seemed to touch the pinnacles of incivility.

Smiling grimly to myself, I rolled out of bed and, crossing to the washstand, bathed my eyes and splashed my head and neck. Once rid of my adversaries, I was determined to make it as hard as possible

for them to pay me a return visit. In his hasty departure Mario Gualia had left behind the bag of tools, and these I examined with more enthusiasm than they had at first inspired in me. It was a simple equipment containing a pair of pliers, two screwdrivers, and a large and a small adjustable spanner, three tyre levers, and a few nuts and bolts.

With the screwdrivers and two of the tyre levers I securely wedged the door and moved the bed across it. I next turned my attention to the window and, raising the sash, inspected the shutters. These I found were of steel and of stout gauge with reënforced beadings. With the remaining tyre lever I attempted to break away the padlock, but met with no success. I succeeded, however, in forcing a narrow gap between the two shutters wide enough to give me a diminutive view of the street below. It was a sombre and deserted street with tall, melancholy houses and provided no clue as to its locality. But, raising my eyes to the level of the roof opposite, I detected in the distance the familiar outline of four tall chimneys. Architectural observation has never been a strong feature with me, but there was no mistaking the chimneys of Lotts Road Electric Power Station. Their position in relation to the sun convinced me that the house was situated somewhere in Fulham, or just north of the King's Road, Chelsea. The knowledge was obviously of no practical service, yet it cheered me up quite a little. On the road to Xavier one would pass through Fulham running fleetly over Putney Bridge toward the Portsmouth Road.

The thumping of a drum growing nearer and nearer

brought me back to reality. Looking down, I saw the vanguard of a procession of strikers come shuffling up the street. Escorted by mounted policemen and a score of specials, they marched. I had rarely seen a more dismal company of men. They must have been recruited from the dregs of society.

With a feeling of disgust akin to pity, I was turning away from the window when I saw a familiar figure mooching along by the railings opposite. His hands were in his pockets and his coat collar was turned up, but as I looked he lifted his head and his eyes swept over the front of the house and came to rest upon the shuttered windows of my room. In that second I recognised James Warrinder. He stood awhile in thought, then, dropping his head, moved on with the crowd.

With a curious sense of uneasiness, I backed from the window and sat down on the bed.

8

On her journey into Sussex, Noelle passed within a hundred yards of the house in which I was a prisoner. Her first check was at Putney Bridge, where a number of Volunteers were unloading carcassing timber, match, and wire for the barricades. The order for bridge guards had been issued in the small hours of the morning and preparations were under way. A retired Anglo-Indian colonel was in charge, who admonished Noelle severely for joy-riding.

'Won't do at all — won't do!' said he. 'Don't you realise, young woman, that every drop of petrol is of vital importance to the nation?'

But Noelle had had experience of elderly men and was not discouraged.

'Please let me through. It really is important, Uncle Jim,' she besought.

'God bless me, why do you call me that?' he demanded.

'Did I? I'm sorry — only you're so like my Uncle Jim — except that he hasn't such narrow hips and isn't so frightening.'

'Pon my soul,' cried the warrior, 'you're a damned little puss. Well, well, get along with you.'

He returned to his command, giving his moustache an upward brush and following the retreating motor cycle with a very roguish eye.

Along the practically deserted roads Noelle sped with a wide-open throttle. Fortunately for the success of her enterprise, she took the new bye-pass, and avoided Kingston, where a band of roughs, having overpowered the police, were engaged in a tyre-slashing campaign.

At Leatherhead she was stopped by a constable and ordered to report at the police station for special duty. It appeared that the telephone wires had been cut and messengers were required urgently.

'Girls, too?' she asked.

'All motor cyclists,' was the reply. 'I'll take you to the station myself.'

'Don't bother. I know where it is,' Noelle prevaricated, and was gone like a rabbit. After that she made loops round the towns to avoid trouble.

'You know, Bob,' she told me afterwards, 'it was so strange and exciting — that ride. The miles and miles

of empty road — sometimes I felt I was quite alone in the world. Then there was the importance of what I had to do — the tremendous importance. That and the speed helped me to keep my mind from thinking about you. Every time I slowed down hideous thoughts and terrors came crowding back. By going fast I could just keep ahead of them. I told myself that if we could get the stuff made — and made quickly — they would let you go — they'd have nothing to gain by keeping you. That meant ever so much more to me than breaking the strike — than preventing a famine. I rode along those narrow lanes at an awful lick. I wasn't more than five miles from Xavier when the crash came. I had taken a blind corner much too fast, and before I could pull up I went slap into a tree that some brute had felled right across the lane. I saw it and knew I must hit it and just had sense enough, and time enough, to pull off centre, so as to finish up in a ditch rather than on the hard road. I can't tell you what a hurricane of thoughts and miseries rushed through my head between seeing that tree and hitting it. And then — zonk! and I was one with the stars of heaven, Bob, one of a myriad of stars. There was only a trickle of water in the ditch, but as I lay face downward I wonder it didn't drown me. My right wrist looked awfully funny when, at last, I sat up. In a dizzy sort of way I put it between my knees and tugged and twisted at it until something went *snick* and it looked all right again. When at last I stood up, my legs behaved so strangely, they seemed to do what they liked, and I had a regular fight to make them obey me. Somehow I struggled along to see what was left of the

motor bike. It simply didn't bear looking at, so I turned my back on it and started to walk. It's funny, but I can't remember anything about that walk except that I believe I had a nice sort of talk to you. I must have taken hours before I reached the farm — and then it seemed that I didn't, but that it reached me — that it rolled up out of an avenue of trees and opened its arms and took me in.

'The next thing I remember is lying on the horsehair sofa in the dining-room and feeling Anne's hand on my forehead and hearing the squeak of a cork drawn from a bottle of brandy and seeing the moon shining through the open window.'

9

Disregarding the order forbidding the use of private cars for any purpose whatsoever unless provided with a Government pass, Oscar Kahnet was conveyed in his shiny little limousine to the Home Office, where his urgent request for an interview with the Home Secretary was at once acceded to. The terrible upheavals throughout the country had, in a single night, added years to the appearance of Sir Hubert Frayne. The crispness and precision of his appearance and address had gone. He looked grey and old and was unshaven.

As Kahnet came into the room, he lifted his head and demanded wearily, 'Where are those two men?'

Oscar Kahnet shrugged his shoulders.

'You have no news of them, Hubert?'

'None.'

'Have you tried an S.O.S. on the air?' Oscar Kahnet asked.

Sir Hubert shook his head.

'I'll have it done,' said he, rang for a secretary, and gave him the necessary orders. 'Have that broadcast from 2 LO and Daventry every hour until further notice.'

'If we can get hold of Dominic Vane, it'll do,' said Kahnet. 'Shaftoe has been kidnapped, but as far as we know Vane is at liberty.'

'But Shaftoe knows the formula. What good ——?'

'I have found out there is a copy, and have sent a messenger to fetch it.'

'A messenger? Who?'

'A girl, as a matter of fact — the daughter of the inventor.'

'Are you mad?' cried Sir Hubert, and sprang from his chair.

'Not altogether. She's in love with this man, Shaftoe, and I've an idea if any one can bring that formula safely, she will.'

The Home Secretary fell back in his chair, wiping the moisture from his forehead with the palm of his hand.

'How has she gone?'

'On a motor bicycle.'

'Then you are mad — worse than mad — you're a criminal.'

Oscar Kahnet shed upon him a kindly smile.

'I agree it's risky, Hubert, but I had no choice. The invention belongs to her.'

Sir Hubert Frayne looked at him wearily.

'This stuff,' he said, 'you believe in it, Oscar?'

'Absolutely. I believe it to be the most terrific engine for the destruction of industry and the upheaval

of vested capital the world has ever produced. But that I know the constitution of this country is standing in the deadliest peril and that within a few days we shall be faced with famine and disaster, I would oppose its release with the last drop of blood in my body. But enough of that. This is what I want done. First, the aeroplane sheds on the north and west sides of Croydon Aerodrome cleared and placed at my disposal. A detachment of the Machine Gun Corps to guard the sheds day and night. Five hundred undergraduates from the universities to be at Croydon by midnight. A convoy of not less than forty three-ton lorries to be at my disposal immediately. A Government order on all the big chemical factories and warehouses to supply me with whatever materials I may demand to an unlimited extent. Several flights of aeroplanes to stand by on the flying ground, ready to take and deliver the stuff as it is made to all parts of the country. I propose to start buying the chemicals at once.'

'Yes, but how do you know ——'

'I don't know the exact formula, but I know of a group of chemicals from some of which it is compounded.'

Sir Hubert looked up from the sheet of paper upon which he had taken notes.

'Naturally, once you have the formula, the Government will control its manufacture and distribution.'

'No, it won't,' said Kahnet sharply. 'I shall form a limited liability company this afternoon which will operate under Government protection. You will ring

up the Letters Patent Office and advise them that I am to be issued at once with a provisional protection for a substance known as MW-XX.3. I propose to move my entire accountancy staff and a score of clerks from our headquarters in Kingsway to Croydon. Their job will be to run the accounts of the company. As I understand it, MW-XX.3 can be manufactured at around a penny for the equivalent of a gallon. For as long as the strike lasts, the Government, private industrial firms, and the general public will be supplied with the substitute at a standard price of two shillings a gallon.'

The Home Secretary's mouth opened wide to protest, but Oscar Kahnet did not let him speak.

'If, to quote the Prime Minister, we can muddle through at that price, we shall have little cause to complain, and in a very few days I shall have built up a nice little fortune for one or two deserving but tiresome young people who've given me a good deal of trouble just lately.'

Sir Hubert looked at him grimly.

'And *après la guerre* — have you thought of that? Where will you and the other oil companies stand then?'

The muscles at the corners of Oscar Kahnet's mouth tugged pathetically.

'I have thought, Hubert — and I have hopes — and I don't know. For the present we must deal with the present. Come, let's be busy. I want my sheds, my lorries, my volunteers, and all the rest of the jingamaroo.'

'I don't know what the Cabinet'll say,' mused Sir

Hubert, and, ringing for his secretary, rattled off a shower of orders.

10

A hundred yards from the shore a wisp of river fog concealed Dominic and his leaky old boat from his impotent pursuers. The gyves upon his wrists made rowing painful and irksome. The boat was equipped with two short ill-matched oars and it was possible to reach the water only by holding them at the level of his eyes and pummelling away with short dabbing strokes that gave the boat scarcely any way worth mentioning.

Determined to avoid recapture Dominic would have pulled until exhausted had not a more than usual vigorous stroke snapped one of the crazy thole-pins like a carrot. Denied the resistance of a fulcrum, his hands flew back into his own face and knocked him off the seat. Nor was this the worst of the calamity, for, in trying to save himself, he released his hold upon the oars and lost both.

In ordinary weather they should have been easy to recover, but the fog lay as thick as a sponge, hiding everything from view, and left Dominic drifting helplessly upstream with the tide.

For twenty minutes the fog clung about him. Then a breeze stirred and a glow of yellowy sunlight illumined the waterway.

By his own account, he felt with the departure of the fog that he had lost his best friend.

'It was a safe bet that those pals who had chased me so ardently by road wouldn't stop at a bit of boating. Because of the strike, I suppose, the river was practi-

cally deserted, and with a spot-light shed upon me from above, and nothin' else upon the glassy surface, I was about as conspicuous as the star turn in a vaudeville show. Then, again, those blinking irons on my wrists made me so damned helpless. At any moment I expected a hearty old "View hulloa!" to emerge out of crumbling mists behind me. Of course I never guessed the dear lads were friends in disguise — the way they had pooped off their guns at me had dissipated any notion of charitable intentions. I yearned to have my feet once more upon the shore — preferably the north shore. To bring about that object, I tried to tear out one of the stretchers, which, will you believe it? some ass of a longshoreman had *screwed* into the grooves. Rusty screws they were and they held like limpets, but I had to have a paddle and nothing else was available. As I couldn't pull out the stretcher, in a fit of temper I got round behind and sitting in the bottom of the boat started to kick it out. At the second kick I started three seams on the port side and made the caulking fly. The water came in so darned fast that I knew I shouldn't be afloat more'n a couple of minutes, and as that realisation dawned on me I was sighted by the cops. They were still quite a way off, whacking the water as if they hated it. It looked as if the end of the chase was in sight, but by some law divine a wisp of fog settled over the river again and blotted 'em out. Then, through the fog, I heard the throbbing of a propeller, and saw the grey outline of a tug and barges bearing down upon me. No one need envy me what I felt at that moment, embraced as I was by three alternative disasters — being drowned, rammed, or

copped. Of the three the ramming looked worst and seemed most likely. In a thick overcoat and wearing a pair of darbies the only kind of swimming I was liable to perform was under water.

'All I could do was wait for it — and it came. The tug missed me by about ten feet and sheered me off in her wash, but the barges she towed, three abreast, were not so thoughtful. My sinking boat slipped in between the starboard and centre barge and was smashed like a nut. As luck would have it the barges were loaded down to the waterline with ballast, and before I got flattened I rolled over the gunwale into a wallow of yellow sand. I suppose why the police never reported that I was run down in midstream is due to the fact that the wreckage of my old tub got hung up between the barges and didn't start to filter out until we were a mile upstream. The fog held, too, and I dare say they thought that I had made the opposite bank under cover. As a matter of fact, I lay very gratefully on my sand bed and gave up worrying about anything until an enormous chap, carrying a lump of wood to support his authority, came rolling along a length of duckboard and asked me in a very picturesque way what I was doing there and why and how, and several other things that he might have left out.

'You could have fried bacon on that man's talk — and burnt it. He possessed what I should describe as a blistering tongue. There is no doubt he was a man's man. On the whole, I liked the fellow and would have had a shot of fraternising if he hadn't had the bad luck to spot the darbies. After the lively doings the

night before, the sight of handcuffs not unnaturally suggested that I was one of the miscreants who had set the Thames afire. Making a funnel of his free hand, he loosed a roar, accompanied by a string of names. A moment later I was surrounded by a group of hostile bargees. It's quite out of the question to set down an accurate record of the pow-wow that followed. I did my best to get an oar in and failed. You know how hopeless it is to get an idea out of a thick head that has once taken it in. In the floating fires, the night before, these lads had only just come through with their lives. Humanly enough, they were casting around for some one to take it out of. My appearance in a pair of handcuffs was like a gift from heaven, and it's a wonder they didn't heave me overboard there and then. One of them went so far as to fill a sack with ballast to act as a sinker and was casting round for a bit of cord to fasten it round my neck when kindlier counsels prevailed. There followed a rough-and-ready court-martial in which some surprising politics were ventilated. To a man they were solid for the strike and were only waiting for the barges to moor at Brentford to knock off work and join in. While agreed, on general principles, that firing the petroleum tanks was a sound democratic move, the danger to which it had exposed them was hard to forgive. Their attitude toward me as a responsible incendiary became difficult to define. 'The argument turned on whether they were justified, on account of a purely personal grievance, in dumping overboard a public benefactor. With proper regard to formality, the question was put to the vote. Each member of the council was given a

lump of coal and a lump of ballast, a bowler hat was produced, and the ballot was taken in silence. I won't dwell on my feelings while it lasted, beyond making an admission that I vowed, if the "noes" had it, that I would make an effort to be a good boy in the future. The noes *did* have it, by an altogether too narrow margin for my comfort, and without ceremony I was dumped through a hatchway into a little black hole aft. Here, I was informed, I should remain until the political differences of the nation had been settled, as, although I might be and doubtless was a good patriot, I was also a public menace and better down there than at large. A few ship's biscuits and a can of water were lowered after me and the hatchway was made fast overhead. In blackness and despair I continued my journey up the river.'

II

'What's the time?' Noelle asked, as slowly the details of the room and the outline of the moon shaped into reality.

'Nearly ten,' Anne replied.

Noelle pushed her away and sat up with startled eyes.

'No — it can't be — it can't!' My father approached and offered her a glass. 'Where's Dominic?'

'He hasn't come.'

'Not come!' Noelle repeated. 'We can't wait for him — we must go.'

She put her feet to the ground, but the room rocked like a ship at sea. She had to cover her eyes to blot it out.

'Come, my dear — an arm round my neck,' said my father, 'and I'll carry you up to bed.'

'No, don't you understand? — we must leave at once. The car — Bob's car.'

'It was taken by the local authorities this morning.'

'The motor bike, then.'

'That, too,' said my father; 'but don't worry, to-morrow'll be soon enough.'

'It won't,' said Noelle, pressing her fingers to her eyes. 'Leave me alone a minute and I'll tell you — everything. A little water, please.'

Anne gave it her and, rising, she went to the open window and breathed the cool downland air. The room was steadier when she turned and, in broken sentences, told them what had happened. Her explanation was interrupted by another voice — harsh and metallic from the loud-speaker of a small radio set in the corner.

'Here is an S.O.S. A reward of five hundred pounds is offered to any person who can assist in the immediate discovery of Dominic Vane, last seen in an open boat on the Thames off Dartford. He is wearing a heavy brown ulster and is in handcuffs. A similar reward is offered for information leading to the discovery of Commander Robert Shaftoe, who was kidnapped from Lancaster Gate on Thursday at 11 o'clock.'

'Good God!' said my father softly.

Anne's face was dead white. The metallic voice droned on with tidings of outrage, riot, and disaster all over the country.

'Because of attacks on bridges and permanent ways, no trains ran to-day. The order forbidding the use of private automobiles, except for doctors dealing with

urgent cases, is emphasised. Infringement of this order will result in imprisonment. All private stores of motor spirit are to be considered Government property and will be collected by local authorities. From noon to-morrow the nation's food supply will be rationed. Because of lack of transportation the city of London is declared closed to business until further notice. . . .'

My father crossed the room and switched off.

'Come, out with it, my dear,' he said. 'All that's happened.'

They tell me she told her story with simplicity and self-command as a string of impersonal facts. The one emotional outburst came unexpectedly from Anne.

'But what's the use — what's the use? Only Bob and Dominic know the keyword and they are both ——' She broke off and bit her lip.

'Have you no faith in Providence, girl?' my father roared. 'History has been made and countries saved by forlorn hopes before to-day. Under Victoria's millstone, you said? Come, my dear.'

Gripping Noelle by the arm, he bore her off to the garden with Pixie, my old brown spaniel, snuffling at heel.

Pixie must have wanted to be in it, too, for, while my father and Noelle worked with a trowel on one side of the millstone, she made the earth fly with burrowing paws on the other. It was Pixie who unearthed the cigarette-tin in which I had hidden the original formula of MW-XX.3, shooting it out as from a catapult to come to rest among the gooseberry bushes from which she retrieved it.

'Oh, Pixie, darling,' said Noelle, and, stooping, kissed

the moist muddy nose, whereby she made a friend that lasted for life.

In the mean time Anne was in the paddock trying to get a halter on Sheila, the brown cob. A sturdy beast was Sheila and had need to be, since her principal duty was to carry my father over the heavy plough of the farm and up the steep borstalls of the downs. Their combined efforts were needed to corner and catch her, and, while being led to the harness room, she put up a mettlesome show of heels. There was a light farm cart in one of the sheds, not much to look at, but serviceable.

The untractable Sheila was harnessed and made fast to a ring in the stable wall, while Noelle, Anne, and my father went indoors for provisions. Half a ham, a loaf of bread, and a thermos of coffee were put in a basket. While Anne was collecting rugs and an old cushion or two, my father rummaged in the gun-room, emerging presently with an old service revolver and a twenty-bore scatter gun, which he had given me on my thirteenth birthday. To these he added an axe and a swamphook, explaining that there might be other fallen trees in the road to be removed. He also carried a knobby ash plant, the inseparable companion of his lonely walks. Lighting the side lamps, for he was a law-abiding man, and ordering Noelle to get into the back and snuggle down on the rugs for a bit of sleep, he picked up the reins and made the whip whistle through the air.

They had scarcely gone a dozen yards when, with a jump which would have done credit to a greyhound, Pixie cleared the tail board with her two front legs and

clung, barking instructions until Noelle put out both hands and hauled her in.

The sound of Sheila's hoofbeats echoed bravely in the moonlight. The crisp roulade of wheels acted like a soothing magic on her nerves, as, with Pixie curled up in her arms and the precious formula tucked into the bosom of her dress, Noelle fell into a fitful sleep.

12

The hours in that Fulham attic were the wretchedest in my life. With nothing to eat, a jug of water my only solace, and a tiny gap in the steel shutters my sole connection with the outer world, my spirits suffered a complete declension. So mortifying and melancholy was the experience that I could almost have welcomed a return visit from my inquisitors. When toward night-fall I heard the key turned in the lock and the rattle of the door handle, I was tempted to remove my wedges and bid the visitor to enter.

A voice, Jura Gualia's, asked what I had done to the door, but, since I did not answer, she called to Mario and I heard them whispering together on the landing.

'Perhaps he has hanged himself,' said Mario cynically; then, thumping on the panel, 'Ho, you, there — ho, you!'

My silence, which I took a fiendish delight in preserving, lent colour to his suggestion, and he beat the panel with added vigour. His agitation found an echo in Jura, who kept repeating, 'Why doesn't Groffe return? Why has he deserted us like this?'

'How do I know? You had better go to the Savoy and find out.'

'And leave an imbecile like you alone in the house with him?'

'He is safe enough. I could wait your return here on the landing with my pistol.'

'But would the streets be safe?' she wondered.

'Safe enough — why not?'

They retreated from earshot, talking in agitated whispers.

That Groffe failed to return was a price demanded by vanity. In his blind departure in search of another set of teeth, he had lost all sense of caution. He was reminded of the madness of his act when he passed through the quadrangle of the Savoy Hotel and was recognised by five of Oscar Kahnet's private detectives. By every imaginable device he sought to rid himself of their unwelcome attentions, but without avail. For the rest of the day they stuck to him like glue. Denied the use of a car, and able to proceed only on foot, he stood no chance against them, and toward evening was driven to retreat into his own apartments. Since he dared not use the telephone for fear of having the line tapped, he sent his servant with an oral message in code to Mr. Kurd Icante at the Metropole. Hoping by this ruse to draw off the field, Mischa Groffe made an unobtrusive attempt to leave the Savoy by the fire stairs. The attempt was abandoned at its outset on the discovery of two burly strangers who occupied the stairs with every appearance of vigilance.

The servant was followed to the Metropole and, when Kurd Icante appeared on the pavement, the pickets were waiting for him. After a short walk round Trafalgar Square, he was escorted home in humilia-

tion. In their eagerness to obey instructions, Oscar Kahnet's sleuth hounds completely frustrated the object for which they had been engaged. By keeping in the background and following at a distance, they might have located the house in which I was imprisoned. Their zeal had a contrary effect. The men they followed, being on their guard, abandoned any attempt to reach me until a more favourable opportunity should arise.

Shortly after the whispered colloquy on the staircase the front door slammed and, crossing to the window, I had a glimpse of Jura hurriedly passing down the street. Barely ten minutes later, faint but unmistakable, I heard the sound of musketry. It came, I judged, from the southeast, somewhere over by those four gaunt chimneys which I had marked earlier in the day. At the time I had no idea of the cause of the firing, or that I was listening from afar to what has since come to be called the 'Battle of Lotts Road.' There is neither space here nor any need to write more than a few lines about that grim, tragical fight which raged round and about the greatest electric power station in England. They say that not two per cent of the employees took part in the attack. They, the employees, following the instructions of their union, had marched out decently and quietly at noon that day. Their places had been filled, within half an hour, by volunteer workers and a detachment of the Grenadiers was detailed to guard the works. Until nightfall there was no hint that a serious assault was contemplated. Without warning the main entrance was rushed and the sentries on duty trampled underfoot. It looked as though

resistance would be overcome at the first onslaught. The rioters were armed with clubs, pistols, stones, and even with bombs. The guards were outnumbered a hundred times by the rabble army. Yet even at those odds they held their fire, and it was not until they were borne back by sheer weight of numbers into the great dynamo galleries that the order to fire was given. What followed is common knowledge — the papers have done more than justice to it. If, as always happens in such a case, a few innocent citizens suffered with the guilty, one can but say that they paid a price for curiosity. But I should like to have felt that poor Jura Gualia had run that night upon a kindlier errand when a bullet, fired over the heads of the scattering mob, ricocheted from an iron lamp standard and found a billet in her heart.

13

I can imagine few men besides my father who would have undertaken the sixty-two-mile drive from Xavier to London with the same dogged determination. From first to last, although opposed by a variety of obstacles, he uttered no complaint nor revealed the slightest impatience. With him the mastery of a difficulty was its own reward.

Within twenty-four hours the amenities for travelling, so far as the private individual was concerned, had relapsed into a state less efficient than that which existed when Victoria came to the throne. In this, I can believe my father, with his antipathy for a mechanised age, found a unique and eccentric satisfaction.

Anne tells me that the old man actually sang as they

bowled along the narrow lanes at a maximum speed of nine miles an hour, for Sheila, after her first display, soon settled to an even trot, and that Father's voice was bluff and booming and more spirited than musical.

'But it was wonderful how it kept me cheerful and steered my mind away from all kinds of gloomy thoughts. Father was the best companion in the world that night.'

Noelle said the same, although for the first hour, with her head pillowed on Pixie's brown warm body, she slept fitfully in the back of the cart.

'Nothing put him out, Bob. He never showed a vestige of fatigue and never once was surprised at anything. Failure didn't seem possible with a man like that in charge.'

The first few miles passed without adventure, but outside Petworth the road was blocked by a felled tree. The old man was in no way discouraged. Handing the reins to Anne, he jumped from the seat, and, armed with the swamp hook and the axe, cut two gaps through the hedge, one before and one beyond the obstacle; this done he drove the cart through with a good deal of bumping and heaving, which had the result of waking Noelle from her sleep.

Noelle moved to the front seat and they pursued their way to the music of hoofbeats and my father's shanties. In Petworth not a soul was stirring, but half a mile beyond, the light of a gipsy fire twinkled by the wayside. On hearing their approach, a couple of gipsies stumbled sleepily from the caravan and strung themselves across the road, calling on my father to stop. In the general chaos of the country, it was

clearly evident that they meant to have a shot at bigger game than an odd pheasant roosting in the squire's coverts.

'Now, boys, out of the way,' my father bawled, 'unless it's a cracked poll you're looking for.'

One of the men side-stepped daintily, but the second laid hold of Sheila's bit ring and brought her up on her haunches. With a sting like a bee's the leather thong of the whip curled round the man's wrist unerringly. He fell back with a curse as Sheila broke into a canter, spurred on by my father's lusty —

'Roughing it, oh. Roughing it, oh.
And nobody cares a damn.'

As less likely to provide obstacles than the main roads he had chosen a route that led through North Chapel, Hambledon, and Wonersh. He explained to Noelle that in the neighbourhood of Wonersh was a farmer with whom he had had friendly dealings in the past and with whom he hoped to exchange Sheila for a fresh horse.

'Will that be halfway?' she asked anxiously.

'Just about.'

'How far have we gone already?'

'A good twelve miles, my dear,' he answered proudly.

'Have we? How splendid!' she managed to say, although to herself she thought, 'Twelve miles in nearly two hours and over fifty to go.'

'With luck,' she said, 'when is the earliest we should arrive?'

'Under Providence some time to-morrow afternoon.'

A silence fell between Noelle and my father for the

next mile or two. At last he said, 'Have you and Bob fixed up to get married?'

'Yes — last night.'

'Good,' said he. 'I won't say he's luckier than he deserves because you wouldn't thank me for saying that, but I'll content myself by saying he's lucky. Hullo! What's here?'

'Here' was a solid mass of stationary lorries blocking the sunken road along which they were passing. A sentry leaning against the bank stepped out and challenged.

'I'm a friend right enough, who are you?' my father demanded.

'Two-three-four M.T. company from Chichester.'

'Are you moving on?'

'Don't look like it. Aht o' juice, we are. Been stuck 'ere solid for the lars' four hours waiting for supplies.'

A very young officer came up and asked what was the matter.

'Hoping to get by, that's all,' said my father.

'There's no hope of that, my man, you must go back.'

'I don't believe in going back,' said my father, curbing his temper. 'I've particular reasons for going forward.' He cast a critical eye up the twelve-foot banks that margined the road. 'Would you be good enough to lend me a dozen of your men to manhandle my cart up that bank and round?'

'But the men have had orders to turn in.'

'You could order 'em to turn out.'

'I don't see the point of it.'

It was then that Noelle spoke. 'Please don't refuse.'

There's something rather like a war on, even if you're not taking part in it.'

The young officer flashed a torch on Noelle and was about to reply indignantly when something in her face checked him.

'I'll do what I can if you're really in a hurry,' he said.

'Thank you,' she said; 'we are.'

The operation of heaving the cart up the bank, over three ploughed fields, through two hedges, and down the bank on the far side of the convoy occupied the best part of an hour.

When it was over, the young man shook hands with all of them and expressed regret that he had not shown more eagerness to help.

'One simply isn't used to the idea of any one in a real hurry bein' in a cart,' he said.

Shortly after the incident Sheila betrayed evidence of having had enough of it. Although my father and the two girls dismounted at every hill, she fell to a walk at the slightest provocation. Anne was rather droll in her description of that part of the drive.

'Oh, Bob,' she said, 'a slug could have passed us. Before that time I had never hated an animal, and even now I can't bear confessing it, but I hated Sheila from the bottom of my heart. If she had been really trying, I could have forgiven her, but she wasn't. She was being lazy and obstinate and horrid. Father, who knew her ways, wouldn't use the whip. He said we must keep that in case we wanted a bit of extra speed at any time.'

A mile north of Chiddingfold, Sheila committed the

final indiscretion of casting a shoe, and going dead lame on her near hind leg. For some distance my father led the poor hobbling beast, the two girls and Pixie following behind. Their spirits were by then at their lowest ebb. Realising the futility of proceeding any farther in that fashion, the old man called a halt by a field gate for grub and a council of war. A ration of coffee and a slice of ham put a better complexion on the future. They had decided to knock up the nearest farmer and see what could be done about getting a new horse when, as my father would say, the Divine hand of Providence took part in their troubles.

Encouraged by the relaxation of her labours, the deplorable Sheila lifted her head and neighed. The neigh was echoed, and a moment later the wet muzzle of a little grey mare brushed Noelle's cheek as she stood with her elbows resting on the top bar of the gate. Coming out of breathing darkness, that ghostly apparition would have startled a yell from most girls, but Noelle was concerned with matters of greater importance than nerves. Relinquishing the piece of ham she was eating, she seized the little mare by the nose and forelock and hung on grimly.

'Got him!' she cried.

'Got what?' cried Anne.

'A horse,' said she.

As to the illegality of what followed, there can be no two opinions, but my father salved his conscience for making the exchange by knotting two five-pound notes and a scrap of paper bearing his name and address in a bandana handkerchief and tying it firmly to Sheila's tail. As Sheila was pushed into the field, the grey mare

was led out of it, a proceeding in which, for fear of her escape, every one, Pixie included, took part.

As they went spanking down the road, my father remarked, 'In the matter of breeding and blood the other fellow has the best of the exchange. Not but what,' he added ungrudgingly, 'little Providence here has quality.'

Little Providence, as she came to be known, put new heart into the enterprise and bowled them along as merrily as a butcher's pony stepping it in the High Street.

14

Having regard to the immense pressure of work thrown upon the Home Office by the state of affairs prevalent all over the country on this the first day of the general strike, it is remarkable that in no single respect were Oscar Kahnet's requirements neglected. The sheds at Croydon Aerodrome were cleared and a special defence force was present and correct when the first of an endless stream of lorries containing chemicals arrived. These supplies were not drawn from London alone. The resources of all the great chemical warehouses throughout England were drawn upon. All afternoon and night freight aeroplanes were departing from and returning to Croydon laden with mysterious cargoes. These and the lorries were met and unloaded by a force of special volunteers whose duty was to destroy classification labels on all crates and substitute serial numbers. Another force carried the crates and carboys to the sheds, where they were handed over to the five hundred amateur dispensers from the universities.

By this management the undergraduates, whose duty it would be to compound MW-XX.3, would be totally ignorant of what they were handling. Their responsibility would be to mix specified quantities of unknown substances and hand them over to the packing section.

It was generally agreed that Oscar Kahnet's lay-out of the working principles of this impromptu factory was a miracle of organisation. Having outlined exactly what he required, he handed over the management of the factory to a young Scotsman named John Macburney.

Macburney took charge at 11.45 P.M., or roughly at the same time Noelle, Anne, and my father left Xavier, and within half an hour of the arrival of the first contingent of undergraduates. These lads had rushed down to Croydon on every conceivable form of motor vehicle that could be mustered. In several cases as many as three travelled on a single motor bicycle. Two-seater cars accommodated anything up to seven passengers. The damage done to springs that night was inestimable. With the irresponsibility of youth they regarded the enterprise in the light of a prodigious lark. They looked forward to having the time of their lives and they found John Macburney. In this indomitable Scot was revealed a combination of energy, pugnacity, and satire that could not have been rivalled by a regimental sergeant major of the brigade. Causing the undergraduates to be arrayed before him, he mounted a table and for twenty minutes directed upon them an effluence of pungent and unremitting sarcasm embellished with classical asides. Before this torrent

even the proudest spirit quailed. In conclusion he said, with a smile which won all hearts, 'And now that we understand each other, I am sure we shall get on verra well together.'

That neither Dominic nor I took any part in the adventures and activities of that amazing day is one of the most tragic reflections of my life. The barge in which Dominic lay a prisoner was moored in the basin of Brentford Canal. His captors had gone ashore for beer and politics. Cramped in his Little Ease, Dominic passed the time nibbling hard biscuit and serenading the bargee's wife, from whom he was separated by a partition of blackened timber. He was obliged, subsequently, to confess that as a troubadour he had no success.

'Ow ve 'ell am I goin' ter git ter sleep wiv vat blinkin' rah goin' on?' she demanded.

'I don't want you to go to sleep until you've unscrewed the hatchway, my sweet,' he answered. 'Would you leave me to perish in the dark, dearest?'

'If 'Erb 'ad 'ad a crack o' sense 'e'd 'a' bunged you in the worter, 'n' I tol' 'im so.'

And this was a man for whose release five hundred pounds was offered.

My own case was not much better. About 2 A.M. a tremendous activity started outside the door of my room. At first I could not fathom what it was all about, but noises are very informative, and I gathered at last that Mario Gualia, the poor impotent little wretch, was strengthening my prison by fixing a second door into the architrave. Left alone so long, he must have got the terrors and imagined that a single door would

not hold me. I cannot believe that he was much of a carpenter, for he made very heavy weather of the job and cursed fluently at the mischievous behaviour of the tools he was using. Had he known it, he might have saved himself the trouble, for I had no intention of trying to escape. During the last few hours of solitude I had done some serious thinking and given my imagination free rein.

As things stood in the country, I was confident that Noelle and Oscar Kahnet would have decided to make use of MW-XX.3. Mischa Groffe, believing I was the only person alive who was acquainted with the formula, would, so long as I remained a prisoner, leave them unmolested. In the circumstances, then, whatever the personal hazard, every argument pointed to the advantage of my remaining in captivity until the manufacture and distribution of MW-XX.3 had been secretly and successfully carried out.

I cannot attempt to express the solace this line of reasoning provided me in the wretched situation in which I found myself. Had I known that Dominic was missing and with him the all-important key to the code, I think I should have gone off my rocker. Mercifully that knowledge was denied me, and fortified by the hope and belief that indirectly my imprisonment was of some use, I resolved to endure it to the best of my ability.

15

There comes into my mind from a leaky cell of an imperfect memory a snatch of verse undoubtedly by Kipling, which tells of the vanity of trying to predi-

cate what Englishmen will do in any set of circumstances.

'Their psychology is bovine, their outlook crude and raw,
They abandon vital matters to be tickled with a straw,
But the straw that they were tickled with — the chaff that they
were fed with,
They convert into a weaver's beam to break their foeman's head
with.'

There was a time in 1914 when it was considered bad form to talk of the war after the service of coffee and brandy. This polite restraint did not survive long, perhaps because men gave up drinking brandy or because the war got too big to be polite with. But many freaks of conduct did survive, sustained no doubt by age-worn tradition, and such slogans as 'Business as usual.'

Here, while the general strike lasted, was an emergency every bit as grave as any war, and yet a vast section of the public went about their business as usual, and an even smaller section, who had no business, went about their pleasures as usual. Golf links were crowded, bridge was played, and some remarkable catches of salmon were reported on the Wye.

The Tory spirit dies hard and moves slowly, and a great many aristocratic individuals, with white moustaches and rugose faces, witnessing what well might develop into the crumbling of the Constitution, shrugged their shoulders and pursued their normal courses with outward imperturbability.

Of such character was Lord Armagnac, M.F.H. of Merrow. From a week-end rabble his lordship had raised the Merrow Hunt to a social standard equivalent

to that of the Cottesmore or the Quorn. Until he became Master, the Merrow had gone by the vulgar title of 'The North Surrey Hunt.' Under his control it became the Merrow and the undesirables vanished. At the end of his sixty-ninth year he knew all there was to know about hounds and horses, but very little else. It was his proud boast that he had ridden to hounds every birthday since his tenth year. To allow his seventieth birthday to pass without being in the saddle was unthinkable. He regarded it as an obligation, not only to himself, but to the whole country, that this anniversary should be respected and celebrated in the proper fashion. That a lot of damned miners and railway men thought fit to disorganise the nation must not deter the hounds from meeting at Chessington Old Farm.

'Good Gad! once let those beggars think they'd rattled a gentleman out of enjoying his sport and our number'll be up with a vengeance.'

The members of the hunt were a little dismayed when, on the night that Noelle, Anne, and my father were driving up from Xavier, Lord Armagnac, booted and spurred, presented himself at their several abodes and announced that the meet would take place at Old Farm according to schedule. The noble lord's personality was compelling, and, right or wrong, he was not a man to argue with.

'I shall expect ye. Apart from it being my seventieth birthday, it's a national duty to show the bounders what they're up against.'

Several members of the hunt had already enlisted in public services, but others were still enjoying a kind

of militant idleness. Of the latter there were enough to make a modest field and these, albeit with some dubiety, discussed the project from a variety of angles. The discussion was largely ruled by love and fear of the Master, coupled with a generally shared opinion that it was pretty bad luck after fifty-nine years in the saddle if the old man was to be cheated of his sixtieth hunting anniversary.

The argument of sentiment is very prevailing, and so it came to pass that some twenty gentlemen in immaculate pink, feeling, it must be admitted, a little self-conscious, met in the courtyard of an old Tudor farm on the outskirts of Chessington at ten o'clock the following morning. After pledging their Master in a stirrup cup of hunting port, the solemn field proceeded to draw a cover half a mile away.

Noelle, Anne, and my father had heard the sound of the horn and the cry of a huntsman working the hounds as the cart, drawn by a horse borrowed from a farmer at Wonersh, bowled along the road to Surbiton.

'Aren't they amazing — Englishmen?' Noelle had said. 'Hunting in all this upset!'

But my father seemed to have caught the infection that inspired the hunt and let go a mighty 'Tally ho' as the fox broke cover and streaked over the landscape. The borrowed horse was infected by the same enthusiasm and with distended nostrils broke into a canter. They had made good time since Wonersh, where they had snatched a bit of breakfast and my father had scraped his chin with a borrowed razor.

Beyond a warning from the police at Leatherhead that the London road was unsafe and that they would

be wise to wait for and join up with a horse transport column which would be going up under cavalry escort at 5 P.M., they had met with no obstacles to detain them.

'We can't wait,' said Noelle. 'We must go on.'

Beyond Leatherhead they encountered no one but an occasional cyclist and a cavalry patrol, four tired men and an officer with a cut over his right eye. The officer wheeled his horse and asked where they were bound for.

To avoid interference my father made the equivocal reply, 'Just along.'

'Then the sooner you get these women indoors the better. Plenty of private individuals have been roughly handled round the suburbs and on the Portsmouth road this morning and last night.'

They thanked him and drove on. After that Noelle tells me the old man started singing again, but, stealing a sidelong glance at him, she saw that his mouth looked grim and there was something very vigilant in his eyes.

They had reached the outskirts of Surbiton and already the flavour of Greater London was in the air when at a turn in the road the hold-up developed.

An old-fashioned victoria, with one wheel wrenched off, stood drunkenly by the roadside. A few yards away, propped against some railings, lay a figure that looked suspiciously white and still. The contents of a suitcase were scattered on the grass, and about it were clustered a score or more of ugly-looking customers who wrangled over the spoil. The road to left and right was screened by tall trees, in which it was reasonable to

suppose that the freebooters had lain in ambush. The horse and cart had come almost on top of them before they were aware of its presence.

My father took in the situation at a glance and wheeled the cart round so suddenly that Anne and Noelle all but went overboard. But swiftly though he had acted, three of the men were even swifter. A great raw-boned fellow made a grab at the horse's head; his two mates, seizing the tail board, tried to swing themselves into the cart. Launching a yell that could have been heard a mile away, my father rose in his seat and brought the whip with a venomous slash across the horse's neck. For an instant the poor beast reared, pawing the air in savage pain, and then bolted with a jerk that nearly broke the traces. The fellow who had hold of the bridle, struggling to maintain his grip, missed his footing and went flat on the road, the cart passing over the length of him from leg to shoulder.

Simultaneously, Pixie, aroused from an agreeable slumber by the spectacle of a hideous and unfamiliar face within a foot of her own, with a low snarl bit it unforgivably and unforgettably. It was Noelle who poked the ferrule of my father's ash plant in the side of the third man as he was swinging a leg over the tail board. He abandoned ship head first, and, looking over her shoulder, Noelle saw three men lying very untidily in the road, while four others, encouraged by savage oaths from the group behind, had thrown themselves onto bicycles and were pedalling furiously in pursuit.

The speed of the bolting horse made the cart rock perilously from side to side, and at a corner a few hundred yards on they took a ditch and came out on their

wheels only by a miracle. The horse had a mouth like iron, and, although my father with a rein lapped round either hand, sawed at the bit unmercifully, he could only contrive to maintain a shadow of control. A short, sharp incline and the miles already travelled were the factors which steadied the crazy gallop to a canter and so to an indignant trot.

Along the straight white road behind them the figures of the four cyclists were seen getting nearer and nearer.

'They are after us,' said Noelle.

My father drew the palm of a hand across his forehead, which was beaded with sweat.

'It's the first time I've ever turned tail,' he growled, 'and it's a hard thing to stomach. But for the importance of what you carry, I'd face round and ram that bunch, if I died among 'em.'

He dragged the revolver from his pocket and dropped it into Noelle's lap.

'Take this, and if those beggars get too close blaze away and damn the consequences.'

The shouts of the pursuers calling on them to stop were plainly audible when Noelle swivelled round and rested the big service revolver on the back of the seat.

'What are we going to do?' she asked.

'Branch off to the right and cut into the Portsmouth road, I suppose. It's no good asking for failure.'

The bitterness of that retreat was biting into his soul. The horse had fallen to an easy trot when suddenly tracing through and about the yells of the pursuers came the sound of a huntsman's horn and the wild 'Loo-loo-loo' of the hounds in full cry.

Over a fold in the landscape came a sleek, brown figure flat to the earth, creeping rather than running. A bare fifty yards behind, with nose down to the scent, came the leading hound. The fox had run well and truly, a clear, bold, open run without check for a full hour. He had run beyond the power of muscles and the edge of will. The last of his strength ebbed away in a struggle through the blackthorn hedge. The pack going over and through it made an end of him in the open road. Following the Master and his whips, the field, like a squadron of cavalry, swept over the hedge and to a man were in at the kill. His face purple with pride and pleasure, Lord Armagnac called on Heaven to witness that it had been the finest run for a dozen seasons.

‘Though what the hell you mean, sir,’ he said, swinging round in the saddle and glaring at my father, ‘in driving your damned cart in front of a running field is a question you’ll find hard to answer. Don’t you know you might have turned the fox?’

‘At that moment, sir,’ my father replied with dignity, ‘I am ashamed to say we were the fox and those damned rogues that are turning their bikes up the road were the hunt.’

‘Hullo, what’s that girl doing with a pistol?’ some one questioned.

‘I was going to shoot with it,’ Noelle answered, and the seriousness of her face robbed the statement of absurdity.

Lord Armagnac looked at her severely, his bushy eyebrows going up and down like a semaphore.

‘Eh, what’s that? Is there anything wrong?’

Noelle told me afterwards that she didn't know what persuaded her to take them into her confidence.

'But they looked so English — a tiny bit pompous and important, perhaps, but so splendidly loyal.'

She must have made a pretty good job of the story. When she finished, not a word of doubt or uncertainty was expressed.

'They just looked at one another and nodded, and though some of them were quite old their faces went pink and white like an angry schoolboy's.'

'Gentlemen,' said the Master, squaring his shoulders and turning to the hunt, 'we've had a memorable run this morning and we owe it to the country and to ourselves to distinguish that fact in a practical and patriotic fashion.' Then, turning to Noelle with a crisp bow, 'If the escort of the Merrow would help you to complete your journey in safety, we shall be honoured to place ourselves at your disposal.'

16

I can well believe it was one of the happiest moments in my father's life when he turned the cart toward London.

The whips were ordered to take the hounds back to kennels. With the Master leading and a file of huntsmen on either side, the procession moved up the road at a smart trot.

At the corner where the expedition had so nearly met with disaster, they drew the covert in which the ambush had been secreted. A clean sweep they made of it, too. A good few pates were broken, whips cracked, and leather thongs curled mercilessly about the bodies of

men who melted screaming into the landscape. The punitive expedition completed to his satisfaction, the Master rallied his followers and they proceeded on their way. It was a point of honour with the Merrow to ride hard and follow straight, and not since the inception of the hunt was this tradition more exactly observed.

At the foot of Kingston Hill they were warned that outrages had been committed on Wimbledon Common which, in the last twenty-four hours, had become a kind of Communistic headquarters.

'I thank 'ee, but we'll take our fences as we come to 'em,' said the Master.

The statement was not without foundation, for the usually deserted solitudes of the Common were thronged with an evil company. No attempt, however, was made to interfere with the gentlemen in pink, or with the occupants of the farm cart which they devotedly escorted. A commonly shared amazement at the unusual appearance they presented suspended anything in the way of hostile action. One little East-End-er with his mouth agape exclaimed, 'Blimey! 'Untsmen. Gor lumme! if they ain't loosed 'untsmen against us!'

They did not draw rein until they reached the barricade at the foot of Putney Bridge.

The same officer whom Noelle had addressed as 'Uncle Jim' was still in charge and gave the sentries orders to allow the hunt to pass. He insisted, however, on wringing the Master warmly by the hand and declared that he had provided the most conspicuously constitutional sight he had seen since the strike began.

It seemed unlikely that they would be allowed to proceed until he had recited some personal experiences of the chase enjoyed by himself and brother officers on the North-West Frontier, but they were rescued from this calamity by Noelle, who interrupted the account by saying, 'I'm still in a hurry, Uncle Jim.'

They had passed on before the veteran recovered from his astonishment.

In the traffic-deserted thoroughfares the cllop of the horses' hoofs rang sharp and clear.

Sitting on my bed, dreary, hungry, and wretched after a fast of over forty hours, the unusual sound brought me to my feet and took me to the window. Looking down through my tiny peephole, I saw that amazing pageant go by. The Master, the gentlemen in pink, the old farm cart — in which as a boy I had gone a hundred times to market — Anne, my father, and Noelle. It flashed by my narrow field of vision so swiftly that I thought my senses were playing a fool trick on me. But from some telepathic message or from an instinctive sense of nearness as the cart came opposite my window, Noelle lifted her head and I saw her eyes. I knew then that what I had taken for imagination was real — real. Lifting my voice, I launched a great glad cry.

'Noelle! — Noelle!'

But the thickness of shutter, the jingle of bit and chain, the drumming of hoofbeats deadened the sound of my voice.

I called again, 'Noelle! — Noelle!'

The last huntsman vanished from view, the hoofbeats died away into the distance. I lurched back to

the bed and sat there hammering the mattress with shut fists and shouting her name and thanking God and laughing with a throat that ached from a torment of happiness.

And Mario Gualia from behind the doubled door, his nerves worn to shreds from his lonely vigil, screamed at me to be silent.

17

In the late afternoon of the same day an eccentrically intoxicated bargee heard, as from afar, the voice of a loud-speaker disseminating news from the balcony of Brentford Town Hall. It would be vanity to pretend his faculties were under any sort of command, but he heard, or thought he heard something about a reward of one thousand guineas which would be paid to any one giving information leading to the discovery of Dominic Vane, 'last seen in a boat off Dartford on the river Thames and believed to be wearing handcuffs.' The message was repeated twice and at its repetition formed some sort of conjunction with a remote undertaking of the bargee's. What that undertaking might have been he was in no way clear. It had to do with handcuffs and a man in a boat. It had nothing whatever to do with a thousand guineas.

'For what,' he asked himself, 'is a thousand guineas?' And the answer, 'There's no such thing.'

Making a megaphone of his hands, the bargee shouted with blurred articulation, "'Ow do I git it, eh? Hi! 'ow do I git it?'

The voice went on talking of other matters.

In his pocket the bargee had a few pieces of broken

brick — just in case. One of these, with fortuitously accurate aim, he shied at the loud-speaker and, striking it upon the diaphragm, silenced it.

The subsequent succession of events was painful and surprising. A regular constable and two impassioned specials, falling upon him from the rear, whipped the bargee into the police station before you could say knife. Strapped to a stretcher and protesting brokenly that not even under duress would he betray the good and loyal patriot he had rescued from the watery embraces of the Thames, he was carried ingloriously to a cell.

Now it happened that among the officers who had taken part in the fracas was Sergeant Waygood, who in company with Reskey had been engaged in the pursuit of Dominic. With an uncommon flash of inspiration, the ravings of the drunken man opened a luminous port in his mind. Being from the Yard, he could do much as he liked at local stations, and there was no demur when he gave orders for the light to be extinguished. In the darkness he entered the cell and noiselessly bestowed himself upon the wooden pallet to listen and take heed. He could have saved himself the trouble of being quiet, for the flow of invective that poured from the bargee would have drowned an explosion at the gas works.

Most of what the man said was mere general abuse, but sandwiched between oathy periods a complete story began to emerge.

Ten minutes later, Sergeant Waygood, flushed with a tremendous excitement, reappeared in the charge room and demanded the services of twenty specials and a prison van.

Lily, as the barge was euphemistically named, was moored in the basin north of Brentford Bridge. The sudden appearance of so large a body of police entering uninvited the galley in which the bargee's wife was preparing a modest collation inspired that vigorous soul to a first-class imitation of her husband's style of address. If there was anything she neglected to say of a crude and unconventional kind, it was not for lack of trying.

Above the hubbub of many voices came the low, sweet notes of a song.

With a triumphant shout, Sergeant Waygood scuttled out of the galley and, crying to the others to follow him, fell savagely to work upon the hatchway. A moment later, a dirty but still debonair figure was dragged out into the pale evening sunlight.

'Mr. Dominic Vane?' Waygood demanded, scarcely daring to believe his luck.

For a moment Dominic wavered, then a rueful grin split his features.

'I suppose so,' he said. 'Anywhere's better than that damned hole.'

18

I would have given much to have been there when, at six o'clock that night, with Sergeant Waygood's arm linked protectively and restrainingly through one of his, Dominic Vane walked, unannounced, into Oscar Kahnet's little wooden office at Croydon Aerodrome.

For three hours, weary, hopeless, and impotent, Noelle, Anne, my father, and Kahnet had waited silently for news that never came. The formula of

MW-XX.3 was locked in a safe that stood beside the table.

After her ride to Xavier, and even more sensational return, the anticlimax of sitting idle with that incomprehensible document for company was almost more than Noelle's courage could endure. Without the key to the code their ambitions were as remote from fulfilment as ever they had been.

For lack of four figures the impromptu factory with its rows of trestle benches, containers, chemicals and packings, the flights of planes ready at a moment's notice to take the air and distribute MW-XX.3 to all parts of the country, the eager-faced undergraduates drilled by Mr. Macburney into a shape and orderliness their preceptors would have believed impossible, stood idle and waiting.

The first person Dominic addressed was Anne, and that in terms of endearment which would, I hope, embarrass her were they to be repeated.

His smile broadened round the company and finally came to rest on Oscar Kahnet. Then, with the most innocent air in the world and a jerk of the head at Sergeant Waygood, he remarked:

'This little rascal says there's a thousand quid on my head. Did you want me for anything?'

The utter simplicity of that started Noelle crying and my father swearing and Anne stamping her foot. Only Oscar Kahnet, who loved a cool head in an emergency, was able to reply with equal disingenuousness, 'We did rather.' He added, 'We want the keyword or letter to the code formula of MW-XX.3.'

'You do?' said Dominic, 'but where's Bob, then?'

'Shanghaied the night before last,' my father answered.

'He was? Golly, that's bad.' Then to Noelle, 'We must look into that, my dear.'

She only trusted herself to reply, 'You remember the key — please tell us rather quickly.'

'Wait a bit,' said Dominic, and frowned and scratched his forehead.

I can well believe that watching that gesture each person in the room, with the exception of Sergeant Waygood, suffered the tortures of the inquisition. At last:

'I've got it,' he said. 'Am I to spout it out?'

'One minute,' said Oscar Kahnet, and, rising, shook hands with the sergeant.

'I'll not detain you, sergeant, longer than it takes to offer my thanks and congratulations. There will be a — er — tangible recognition.'

'The question is,' said Sergeant Waygood, with unlooked-for honesty, 'whether the drunken beggar that put me wise isn't entitled to it.'

'In that case the sum will be reconsidered and enlarged. Good-night.'

'Nineteen hundred and twelve,' said Dominic, as the door closed.

19

Although there were half a dozen code experts in an adjoining part of the building, it was Dominic who decoded the formula. He had been used to that kind of job in the war. He worked with Noelle's hand on his arm and her face peering over his shoulder.

The job completed to his satisfaction, he handed the result to Oscar Kahnet, who transcribed for each chemical component the numerical alternatives with which he had caused the crates, boxes, and carboys to be classified. Against each number the relative proportions were entered. Ringing for Mr. Macburney, he gave orders for the formula to be typed, multi-graphed, and issued to the workshops immediately.

'It is now seven o'clock, Mr. Macburney,' said he; 'with a little energy the first consignments should be packed and placed on board the planes and lorries within an hour.'

'An hour!' replied the Scot with a deadly glint in his eye; 'there'll be a string of corpses in the shops if that stuff isn't in the air within forty-five minutes.'

'Oh, Bob,' Noelle told me afterwards, 'it was all so wonderfully, terribly — tremblingly exciting. I sneaked away to the shops to see them at work. Never in my life have I seen energy and enthusiasm to equal it. They were marvellous, those boys — such darlings — such bricks! That little Scot, too, he was like a running fire. He seemed to be everywhere at once. He didn't swear, but streams of Latin poured out of him like lava. He gave me a place at one of the benches and let me work with the rest of them. I was there, too, when the first test was made. We splashed it on the grass and it burned with a bluish yellowy flame like snap-dragon at a children's party. In another part of the sheds a printing-press was working, showering out instructions for users. As each tin was filled, the instructions were popped inside before the top was rammed down. The tins were loaded up on push bar-

rows, with four pushers and porters to each barrow. There was terrific inter-varsity competition as to which team would get loaded up, unloaded into the planes, and back to the shops again first. The boat-race was a joke to it. I was there, too, when the first convoy of lorries moved off under escort and the first flight of planes rose into the sky and vanished like stars behind a cloud. As long as I live I shall never see or feel anything like it again.'

After decoding the formula, Dominic and Anne vanished awhile to a remote part of the flying ground, and without ceremony he put both arms round her and declared that in that position he would welcome the handcuffs that he had been wearing for the preceding thirty-six hours.

Anne repeated to me many of the things he said to her with a shameless disregard for the conventions and lack of embarrassment. 'He told me,' said Anne, 'that I was an adorable savage, and he was right. He kissed me with appalling intensity out there on the flying ground. Right in the middle of it, a plane whooped down on us and we had to lie flat on our faces to avoid being killed. Above the roar of the engine he yelled, "Anne, we're done for, kiss me before it's too late." And I did and the wheels of the brutal thing actually touched the back of my head, but I was so happy I didn't care. It was grand.'

So that is the kind of girl she is, and that is the way they behaved, except that some time later they abandoned love-making and made synthetic petrol instead.

All night long by air and road MW-XX.3 was dis-

tributed over the country. All night long Oscar Kahn sat by the telephone in the little matched-boards office in constant communication with the Home Office and the Board of Trade. It was said afterwards that his brilliant powers of organisation never reached a higher pitch than that night. His was the brain that designed the coup which within a few hours put the nation's transport on the road.

At 5 A.M. a certain Royal Personage, the Prime Minister, and three members of the Cabinet arrived at the sheds and, entering by the swing doors at the southern end, started a tour of inspection and congratulation. Unaware of the identity of the visitors, John Macburney descended upon them like a whirlwind and demanded with savage intensity what the devil they meant by disturbing his men at their work.

'I'll have ye understand,' he said, 'that they have something better to do than shake hands at such a time as this.'

And the Royal Personage, with a smile that transfigured a face that for a moment was blank with dismay, becoming unbelievably human, clapped Macburney on the back and told him he was the realest man he had met in years.

At breakfast time that morning broadcast from all stations throughout the country was a general news bulletin in which it was stated that all restrictions against the use of motor cars, lorries, and cycles were cancelled.

'Applications for motor fuel should be made during the morning at town halls, police stations, and volun-

teer enlistment bureaus and later in the day from the recognised agents,' said the announcer.

He went on to say:

'It is the hope of the Government that car-owners, as far as it lies within their power, will help pedestrians to and from their work. The omnibus service, run by volunteers, will be resumed in all cities. The London electric railways will be running by 8 A.M. to-morrow. The Stock Exchange and all banking-houses will conduct business as usual. A normal milk and food supply is assured, although there may be some delay to-day, owing to yesterday's dislocation of transport through fuel shortage.'

With a cup of tea and an untouched egg on the table before her, Noelle sat in Oscar Kahnet's office listening to the effluence of news streaming forth from the radio set in the corner. After the excitement and sleeplessness of the last forty-eight hours, the words sounded vague and unreal. Outside the planes droned like bees. There was something anæsthetic in the sound. Behind the thin wooden partition she could hear the metrical tread of men's feet ticking in her ears like a clock.

A clock — a clock.

She thought, 'Yesterday the clock had stopped and a few funny little people — ourselves — have wound it up again and made the wheels go round.'

But that was less than true — and less than just. The credit — if credit were due — belonged to her father, that dimly remembered, fragile, anxious, isolated dreamer, working and thinking and devising in the recesses of his mind to wring a secret from the heart of

Nature. He had paid a long price for that secret — the heaviest a man can be called upon to pay — spinning earthward out of the element in which his fancy roamed. Poor dreamer! poor ghost! Noelle wondered if his spirit was there to witness, at long last, the realisation and the triumph of his dreams.

She remembered how one day he had said, 'I do so little for you kids. Suppose I were to make you a cart?'

And how the saw had bitten scarcely an inch through the piece of wood she had brought when he faded away, to lose himself among his bottles and crucibles.

It was so hard to associate that vague figure with all this thunderous activity — too hard — impossible. Noelle stretched her arms across the table and lowered her head into them.

'I'm so tired — so tired,' she murmured.

Coming into the office with my father at his heels, Oscar Kahnet stopped and laid a finger to his lips. Then, tiptoeing over the carpetless floor, he took his coat from a peg and laid it gently over Noelle's shoulders. But with a weary gesture she put it away from her and rose.

'Dominic,' she said, 'I want to see Dominic. There's Bob to think of now ——'

20

Prolonged solitude makes the sense of hearing keen. Throughout my detention, tracing the motive and origin of distant sounds had been my principal occupation and entertainment. A main thoroughfare, which I took to be either the Fulham Road or the King's Road, Chelsea, ran, so far as I could judge, about a hundred

yards to the south and just beyond the range of vision afforded by the peephole in the shutters. It was from that direction that what sounds of traffic there had been the day before had emanated.

When I awoke on the third morning of my captivity, the silence and stillness were uncanny. It was easier to believe one's self in a mountain solitude than in one of the limbs of a great city.

Making the best of a bad toilet, for I was without a razor and for three days had gone unshaven, I consumed my modest breakfast of half a pint of water from the tooth glass, and, avoiding my reflection in the mirror, crossed to the window.

The hush was broken by the distant chiming of a church clock striking nine. Its reverberations trembled and died away on the quiet air.

For want of food or any ventilation I felt dizzy and rather sick. I was, at the same time, conscious of a sense of excitement and imminence.

I do not know whether imagination lends to silence that high, thin, sustained note like the hum of insects on a summer's day, but it was to that I was listening when the drone of engines came imperatively to my ears. This in itself was not so remarkable as, although the petrol shortage was acute, there was, so far as I knew, still enough for the Government to run certain essential convoys. But it was not that sound alone that set my heart pummelling with wild enthusiasm and hope, but the roar of prolonged and continuous cheering that accompanied it.

I yearned for the eyes of a snail to push through that narrow crack in the shutters and see what was happen-

ing in the main thoroughfare that crossed the end of the street. It was that yearning that inspired me to make a periscope by smashing the mirror and extending a fragment of it, held in the jaws of a small adjustable spanner, through the crack in the shutter, then, with a larger piece of the mirror propped against the window-sill, I started to observe.

The tail of a long column of lorries passed by followed by half a dozen red General omnibuses from which, painted upon sheets in hasty, straggling characters, were various legends. Among them I read: 'THE NATION ON WHEELS.' 'TAKE YOUR SEATS, PLEASE.' 'TRANSPORT AS USUAL.' Some temporary obstacle delayed the procession and, in the interval between stopping and restarting I read on a fluttering banner the message which set my final doubts at rest.

'Buy MW-XX.3 and help to break the strike.'

In the wake of the buses came an avalanche of cars, vans, and lorries, but I did not wait to see any more. I even dropped the impromptu periscope and danced up and down the little room like a kid at a Christmas party. No lunatic could have acted with less restraint than I in that moment of ecstasy. I scattered the bed-clothes and sang, and slung the gimcrack vases from the mantelpiece at the grocer's almanac pictures on the wall.

The voice of Mario Gualia, shrill with fright, put a period to my transports by asking if I were mad.

'Yes, you little Dago, mad with joy!' I shouted back; 'and if you want to know why, stick your head out of the window and you'll find out.'

I imagine he must have been asleep and was unaware

of what was taking place in the main road. I heard the sound of a window sash raised, followed immediately by a scream of rage. A second later he was hammering at the door with closed fists, cursing me from Gibraltar to Constantinople and back again.

'Liar — traitor — cheat — thief!'

'You've played and lost, Mario Gualia,' said I. 'Open the door and let me out.'

'Stop there and die there! Cheat and liar!'

'Open the door, little Dago,' I repeated. 'We've beaten you with our wits and my hands are itching to get at you.'

'Die there — die there!' he yelled in a frenzy of rage. 'No one will set you free. Die and rot there — die and rot.'

He must have been far gone in madness, for he fired six shots in rapid succession through the panels. From the way the woodwork splintered and bricks in the opposite wall crumbled and powdered, it was evident he had exchanged his toy pistol for a more effective weapon.

I can't imagine how he failed to hit me, for I was right in the line of fire, and felt the wind of at least two bullets pass my cheek.

He did not wait for oral proof of his marksmanship, but with a screech of laughter went clattering down the stairs. That he was bent on leaving me to die of starvation needed no proof, but I jumped across to the window to see the last of him.

Peering down through the crack, I saw to my amazement that the street was blocked and murmurous with people. Their attention was fixed upon one man who

stood upon the doorstep of the house opposite. As I looked, he swept off his hat and raised an arm with a finger that pointed at my shuttered window. His pale, whitish hair and the pinky colour of his eyes made him look as if he had stolen out of some dark place into the winter sunlight. Holding out his other arm to command silence, the man we knew as James Warrinder addressed the crowd.

‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘if the transport and communications of the country could have been held up for a few more days, the just demands of the proletariat and the glorious cause of freedom would have been assured. Our dream of an England for the worker has been shattered by a damnable invention — the wicked contrivance of a man’s brain — details of which have been brayed this morning from every loud-speaker throughout the country.’

From the crowd came an angry growl of assent.

‘I do not have to say I refer to the petroleum substitute known to-day as MW-XX.3, but for which that stream of traffic would be as stationary as the steps of this house. In the cause of freedom I and many other brave spirits, now languishing in gaol, strained every nerve and tissue to obtain and destroy the formula. But we failed — failed. Brothers, there is one direction in which we need not fail — the wreaking of a just and awful vengeance against the man who is responsible for our failure.’

A savage yell followed his words.

‘That man,’ he continued with gathering force, ‘lies concealed behind those shutters at which I am pointing.’

As to a word of command every head turned and every face was lifted, and there burst forth such a hideous cry of hatred and execration as I pray I may never hear again. Above the uproar came the voice of James Warrinder crying:

‘Shall he escape the consequences of villainy?’

The answer came in the form of a rush — a simultaneous convergence of the crowd on the doorway beneath my window. I heard the senseless ringing of the bell, the beating of hands against the panels, and a voice that shrieked, ‘Tear up the railings.’ In the rush to obey that command, the pressure of the crowd bearing down on those in front brought down the crazy railings and a score of maddened men into the area of the house. I heard the screams of the injured, the yells of the avengers, and a thunderous splitting battery of blows upon the door. In all that hideous pandemonium I was conscious of yet another sound, the whining and whimpering of Mario Gualia outside my room. God knows I had little enough time or inclination to consider any one else’s troubles but my own. Before the onslaught of that frenzied mob my chances of being alive ten minutes hence were scanty enough, but somehow the impotent terror of his whimpering spurred a resolve in me to keep my head at all costs. By MW-XX.3 the nation might be said to have been saved from revolution, and it was a sorry reflection that I must die on account of it. With that thought came a sudden inspiration and, searching among the scattered bedding, I found the aspirin bottle in which a few days before I had put the surplus of the stuff after my experience in the cellar.

With feverish haste I emptied it into the half-full water jug, and, as I heard the front door crash in the hall below, I watched the water cloud, effervesce, and become clear as gin. Panting for breath and clasping the jug in one arm, I fumbled for and found a box of matches.

Heralded by threatening cries the vanguard of the mob surged into the house and up the stairs.

Heaven knows what possessed Mario Gualia to empty his pistol into them as they ascended. For those in front there was no escape. They died on the stairs and were trampled upon by infuriated followers. The end of Mario Gualia must have been mercifully swift. A scream, a snarl, a thud, and all was over with him. Came then a rain of blows upon the door of my room, gasping, swearing, the heaving of shoulders, and the head of an iron railing speared through one of the panels. A voice cried, 'All together.'

I heard the hinges rend from the woodwork and, as the door lolled forward, I swilled the contents of the jug across the threshold and tossed a lighted match into the pool.

In the eruption of flame which swept ceiling high, I had an instant's vision of a score of purple faces and a forest of warding arms.

'Back — get back!' some one shrieked.

But behind was a savage mob thrusting forward to be in at the kill. The warning was too late to save those in front from the yellow licking tongues of that welter of fire. Spurred by agony, they struggled to escape, kicking and fighting to be free. As the flames pursued them, the panic spread to the impasse on the

landing. Above the roar and crackle I heard the stair rail snap and saw a dozen men pitch into space upon the heads of others who were pouring up from the street below. Followed the craziest, blindest stampede in which I ever hope to take part. So far I had saved myself with a blanket caught up at the moment that I threw the match, but that slender protection was charring in my hands when I made my bid for freedom. Save for Warrinder — and he, though I did not know it until later, lay dead on the stairs with a bullet in his brain — there was not a soul who knew me nor any one sufficiently unconcerned for his own safety to recognise one man from another.

I was the last to leave the burning room, but I was not the last to reach the street. I went by way of the gap in the banisters, landed on a man's shoulders, jumped sideways across the next break in the staircase, and dropped the last fifteen feet through the well to the hall below. The jar was considerable, but in some measure was broken by a huddle of figures who lay very still. In going through the front door I received a generous impetus from about one hundred and fifty panic-stricken men who shared a common impulse to get out as fast as legs and fists would take them.

Once outside, I didn't get far, but hung to some railings for support. What seemed the very scourings of London's slums scattered past me, shouting, 'Rozzers.' With dizzy consciousness I looked up the street, down which came a body of mounted policemen and some mysterious horsemen in red coats and silk hats. This amazing cavalcade were laying about them with batons and whips. I remember being surprised and almost

shocked to observe that some of them actually rode on the pavements. Before their approach the crowd melted like a mist, leaving me in sole possession of the street.

Consumed with a sickly feeling that I was going to flop, I clung to the railings and rocked to and fro. But from the oblivion into which I was declining, I was aroused by a smart tap on the crown of the head and a harsh voice which demanded, 'Are you going to move on there?'

Opening my eyes with an effort, I found myself looking into the rugged countenance of a mounted policeman.

'Are you going to move on or shall I make you?' he repeated.

'I don't have to move on. I'm the fellow all the fuss is about.'

I believe his uplifted baton had the complete answer to that, but it was never made, for a brown, fluffy body, with barks and yelps and slaverings of joy, hurled itself at me like a projectile.

'Pixie! Pixie!' I cried.

And then I saw jumping and tumbling out of a motor car the four persons I loved best in the world.

21

Having no London home of our own, we drove instinctively to Oscar Kahnet's house in Lancaster Gate. Here we were received by Mrs. Kahnet without manifestation of surprise or dismay.

'That's right, here you are,' she said, and bustled off to see about getting us something to eat.

I wanted a little restorative, too, not wholly because of my long fast, but on account of the way my father had pummelled my knee and Dominic had kept thumping me on the back all the way along in the car.

The little family meal developed into a hunting breakfast by virtue of the fact that Noelle's faithful escort from the Merrow, who had spent the night at Croydon and taken part in the raid on my prison house, could not be persuaded to go decently home. It is true that the car shook them off on the way to Lancaster Gate, but they made such a good second that I fear they must have disgraced themselves to the extent of cantering on hard roads.

In the absence of Oscar Kahnet, who, as his wife explained, 'will never leave that place so long as there is a pin left to pick up,' my father was put at the head of the table to act as a temporary host.

I like to believe that it was delight at our reunion and the successful conclusion to our enterprise, rather than the influence of a 'fine old Tawny,' which provoked the high spirits and loud laughter which distinguished his conduct on this occasion.

The dining-room windows were flung wide open so that we might see the traffic go by, and a more fist-banging and uproarious company I have never sat among. There was boasting and jest-cracking and not a word of sense to be had out of any one. At first I was too far gone in hunger to take much part in it, but when Noelle had made me lap up a cup of beef tea which Mrs. Kahnet had laced with a drop of brandy, my tongue loosened with the best.

It wasn't until then that I had the curiosity to ask

Noelle how they had learnt where I had been put away. For answer she nodded at Dominic.

'Easy stuff, old bird,' he replied to my enquiry. 'If I'd been on the spot instead of counting mice on a river barge, you wouldn't have been there an hour.'

'Yes, but how?' I repeated.

'I asked Mischa Groffe for the address — in fact we both asked,' said he, including Noelle in a to-and-fro gesture.

Something seemed lacking in the explanation.

'You must have found him in a very obliging mood,' I said.

'No, we didn't. He was rather reluctant at first — knew nothing at all — no notion what we meant until Noelle told me to beat him up.'

'And did you?' I asked.

'Royally,' he nodded. 'It was almost a massacre. It revived his youthful memories and a more recent one that we were asking for.'

'I wonder you believed him,' said I.

'We didn't altogether — at least not too implicitly. In fact we brought him along with us in the car to avoid mistakes. If you hadn't been so swallowed up by looking at Noelle, you'd have seen me turn him loose and speed him on his way with a swift kick in his summer house.'

He broke off the narrative to take part in a hunting song, which my father, a wineglass in one hand and a loaf of French bread in the other, was vigorously conducting.

Unobserved and unmissed, Noelle and I crept silently from the room.

On the landing she looked at me and said so and so.
And I said this and that.
And she said the other.

22

When one reflects that during our brief engagement we had been parted for a considerable time, I do not think we can be accused of undue haste in getting on with the wedding. Time should be measured by incident and not by the clock, and there is nothing very surprising in the fact that we walked up the aisle together on the fourteenth day of our acquaintance. Were this not reasonable and rational conduct, for what purpose are special licences printed and issued? Anne and Dominic whole-heartedly supported our enterprise and were not a little crestfallen at the strictures imposed by my father which prevented their following our shining example.

Preserving an adamant front, the old man insisted on at least a month's engagement. He supported this ruling by the argument that a young fellow who set out to propose to a girl and followed a fire engine instead could not be considered to have presented an ideal pattern for husbands. In vain did Anne protest that only such a one would she consent to wed. In vain did Dominic plead that he was rich and steadfast.

On the first count there could be no division of opinions, for in floating the company MW-XX.3 Ltd., Oscar Kahnet had credited him with five hundred shilling shares, which a week later he could have sold for any price he cared to name.

Our profits during the strike and the days that immediately succeeded it were fantastic. Only by an assurance that at the end of the national crisis and with the restoration of normal supplies, the company would go into voluntary liquidation and the formula be deposited in the Bank of England was a financial crash in the world's oil markets averted.

As I have told earlier in these pages, MW-XX.3 does not respond to any analytic test. The secret of its manufacture had, therefore, remained a secret. By an inspiration of Oscar Kahnet's, a letter was published in the English newspapers and reprinted by the press of all countries, in which it was stated, as a provision for the liquidation of the company, that, should any assault designed for the purpose of obtaining particulars of the components used in the manufacture of MW-XX.3 be made upon me or upon any other person familiar with the formula, the trustees of the marriage settlement between Noelle and myself were empowered and instructed to refloat the company forthwith. The letter concluded with the words:

The owners of MW-XX.3 have after due consideration decided that it is not to the present economic advantage of the world for this substance to be generally employed. The formula has therefore been deposited under the Royal Seal at the Bank of England, where it will remain as a safeguard against any shortage of petroleum that may arise in the future.

As the nuptials of Anne and Dominic were condemned to delay, I had a best man at my wedding and Noelle a bridesmaid.

Oscar Kahnet, almost filling the little downland

church, gave her away and Mrs. Kahnet acted as the bride's mother.

Mrs. Kahnet wore a lavender dress and carried a bunch of primroses that she had picked that morning in Farthing Hackett. Pixie, I am ashamed to say, wore a blue bow, and subsequently buried it in the rubbish heap.

Our wedding breakfast was eaten in the dining-room at Xavier and I'm blessed if the Merrow Hunt, or such of them as had taken part in the strike, didn't turn up in force. Heaven knows what hour they started so as to be in time for the ceremony. The Master looked after that. He and my father had developed an affection for one another that was almost maudlin.

'Damme, sir, this is port!' he cried.

And a few minutes later:

'Damme, that was port!'

And when fresh bottles came up from the cellar:

'Damme, sir, this is port!'

They dug up an old folk-song to do us musical honours:

'Bobby Shaftoe's gone to sea,
Silver buckles on his knee;
He'll come home and marry me-ee,
Pretty Bobby Shafto-ooe.'

A nice verse to sling at a man in a tweed suit, with a crooked nose and a face that children laugh at, who, not an hour before, had decently and respectably married the most wonderful — adorable —

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